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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

COLLABORATION

Collaborating to Build Collaboration: The Role of Content Experience in Real-Time Support for a Newly Virtual Conference 4

Sharing Your Authoring Solution with Other Teams 8

Six Questions to Ask About Collaboration and Organizational Change 12

Collaborative Job Hunting: Beating the Sinister ATS 16

Content Collaboration: The Foundation for a Stronger Experience 20

Five Ways to Improve Your Virtual Collaboration 25

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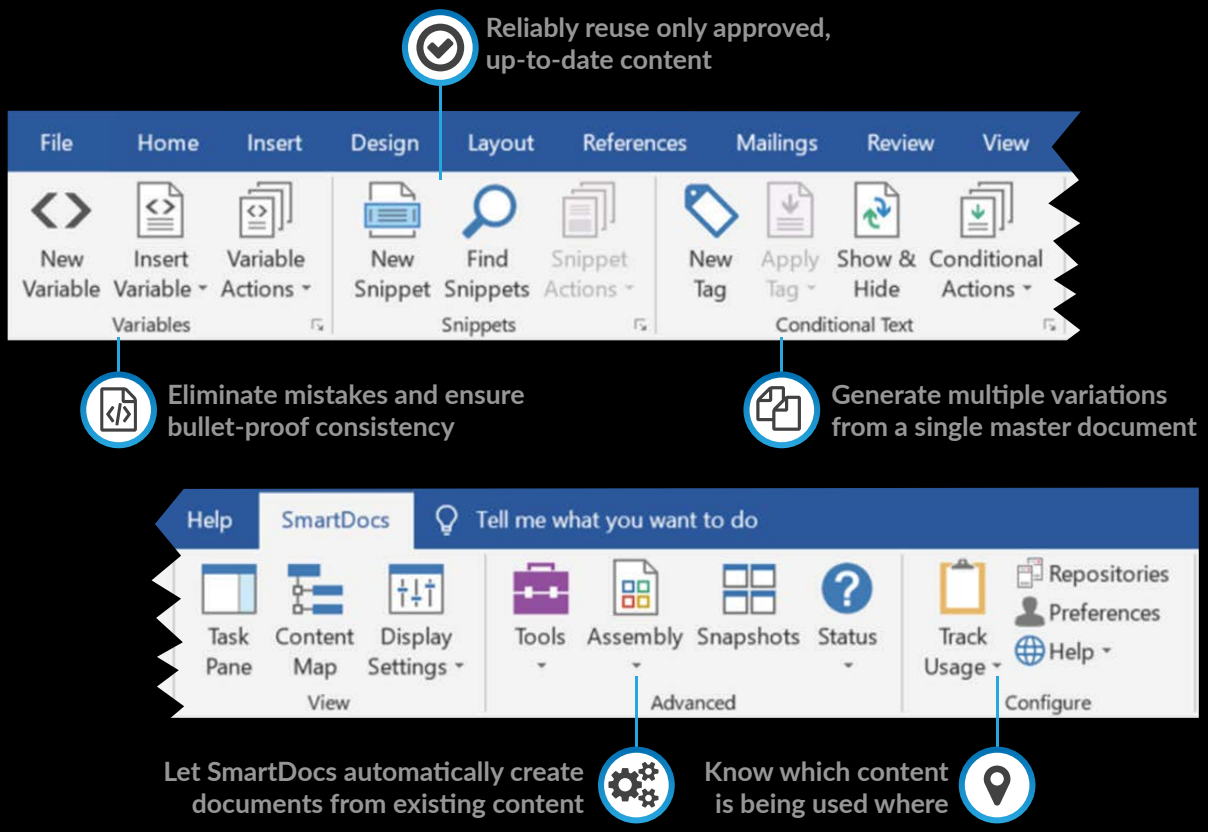

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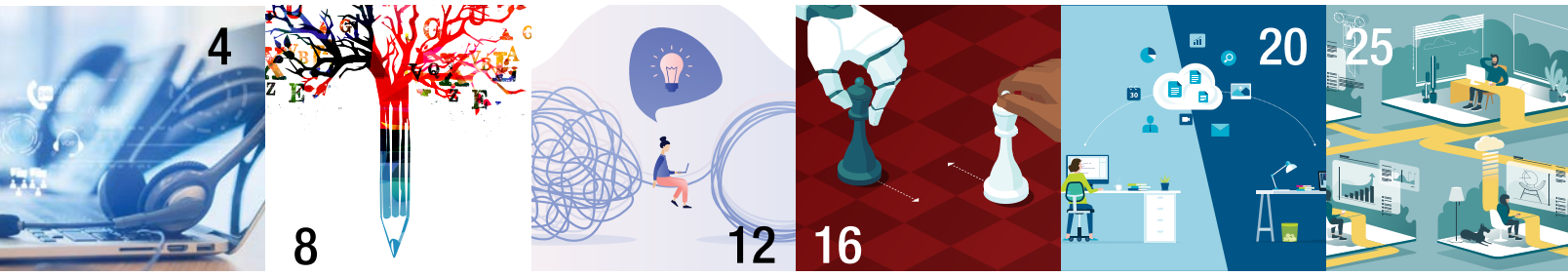

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A Note from the Editor

THE DEFINITION OF *collaboration* is "the action of working with someone to produce or create something" (dictionary.com). Seems simple enough: Pull together a few people, get to work, *et voila!* Something awesome results, right? Sadly, in my experience, it's not quite that simple.

The definition of plain-old *collaboration* doesn't work for me, as I am always striving for that *je ne sais quoi*…that *magical* collaboration. The kind of collaboration where one plus one seems to equal three or five or even 25. To me, that is *true collaboration*.

I suspect we've likely all experienced the magic of true collaboration at least once. It can happen at many levels, from brainstorming to strategizing to implementation. I'm lucky enough to see and experience it almost daily at the level of ideas in my mastermind and coaching groups, and it is truly magical.

Here's what it looks like: You pull together the *right* people, dive into the *right* work (high-value, high-impact, high-priority, strategic…), *et voila!* Something truly awesome *does* result, *and* the collaborators all feel something magical during the process. I get goosebumps just thinking about it! That, to me, is the awesomesauce of collaboration, and frankly, the reason that I do what I do!

Paying homage to the many moving parts and complexities of achieving true collaboration, this issue of *Intercom* is packed with magical goodness. The authors have taken on the collaboration theme with gusto, and I believe you will find much to help you implement a true collaboration project of your own!

First up, Jennifer Schlotfeldt and Nic Sauriol give us a real-world case study of *meta* collaboration in "Collaborating to Build Collaboration: The Role of Content Experience in Real-Time Support for a Newly Virtual Conference," by giving us a peek behind the curtain of a recent IBM virtual conference experience.

In "Sharing your authoring solution with other teams," Ken Schatzke provides a process for collaborating with other teams by sharing your learnings with them—in this case, learnings gained from implementing a soup-to-nuts authoring solution.

Marsi Fein Miller delves into the intersection between collaboration and organizational change to provide a set of questions you can ask yourself as you join or embark on new projects in "Six Questions to Ask About Collaboration and Organizational Change."

In "Collaborative Job Hunting: Beating the Sinister ATS," Jack Molisani introduces us to the technique of collaborative job hunting *with a human* as we battle the rise of the machines in any modern quest for a new job.

Next up, Alyssa Fox argues that a more integrated, and thus better, customer experience is dependent on a more integrated approach to content—requiring collaboration across content functions—in "Content Collaboration: The Foundation for a Stronger Experience."

And last, but certainly not least, Kit Brown-Hoekstra revisits a topic that is especially pertinent to the challenges of pandemic living—virtual collaboration—in "Five Ways to Improve Your Virtual Collaboration."

We have a great column lineup for you, as well.

- In *Ethics*, Russell Willerton presents a timely and highly relevant ethics discussion, exploring "Ethical Perspectives on Captain Crozier's Letter" to postulate about how ethics operates in our new pandemic-oriented world.
- In *Meet The Change Agents*, Scott Abel interviews Kristina Halvorson to better understand the changing landscape of content strategy.
- In *Ask a Manager*, Kit Brown-Hoekstra and Cindy Currie—our "Dear Manager Abbies"—provide insights into searching for a job during a pandemic, uncovering fake job ads, and transitioning back to the office after working from home.
- Finally, Kirk St.Amant strikes the last chord (for this issue, anyway) in the pandemic symphony in *Health and Medical Communication*, discussing "Communication During Public Health Crises."

Finally, don't miss all the STC news that's fit to print in the Society Pages. This is your society, so be sure to stay informed and get involved. Consider writing for *Intercom* or *Technical Communication*, for example! If you're not sure how:

- Check out the *Intercom* editorial calendar and author guidelines from the About menu at https://www.stc.org/intercom/ and the *Technical Communication* submissions information from the Submissions menu at https://www.stc.org/techcomm/
- Contact me (intercom-editor@stc.org) or the Technical Communication editor (tceditor@stc.org) to propose your idea

Now months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation is top-of-mind for everyone, including our feature authors and columnists. You can see this theme running through columns and features alike. Personally, I take this as a very positive sign that we're talking about it, experimenting with ideas, questioning convention, and moving forward together to find the most constructive and uplifting ways to overcome the uncertainty we're experiencing. I thank all who were able to draw on their grit and focus long enough to contribute exceptional pieces to this issue during the earliest (and possibly the most unsettling) phase of the pandemic—no mean feat, I assure you.

Until next time: To your wildly collaborative success!

Andrea Ames

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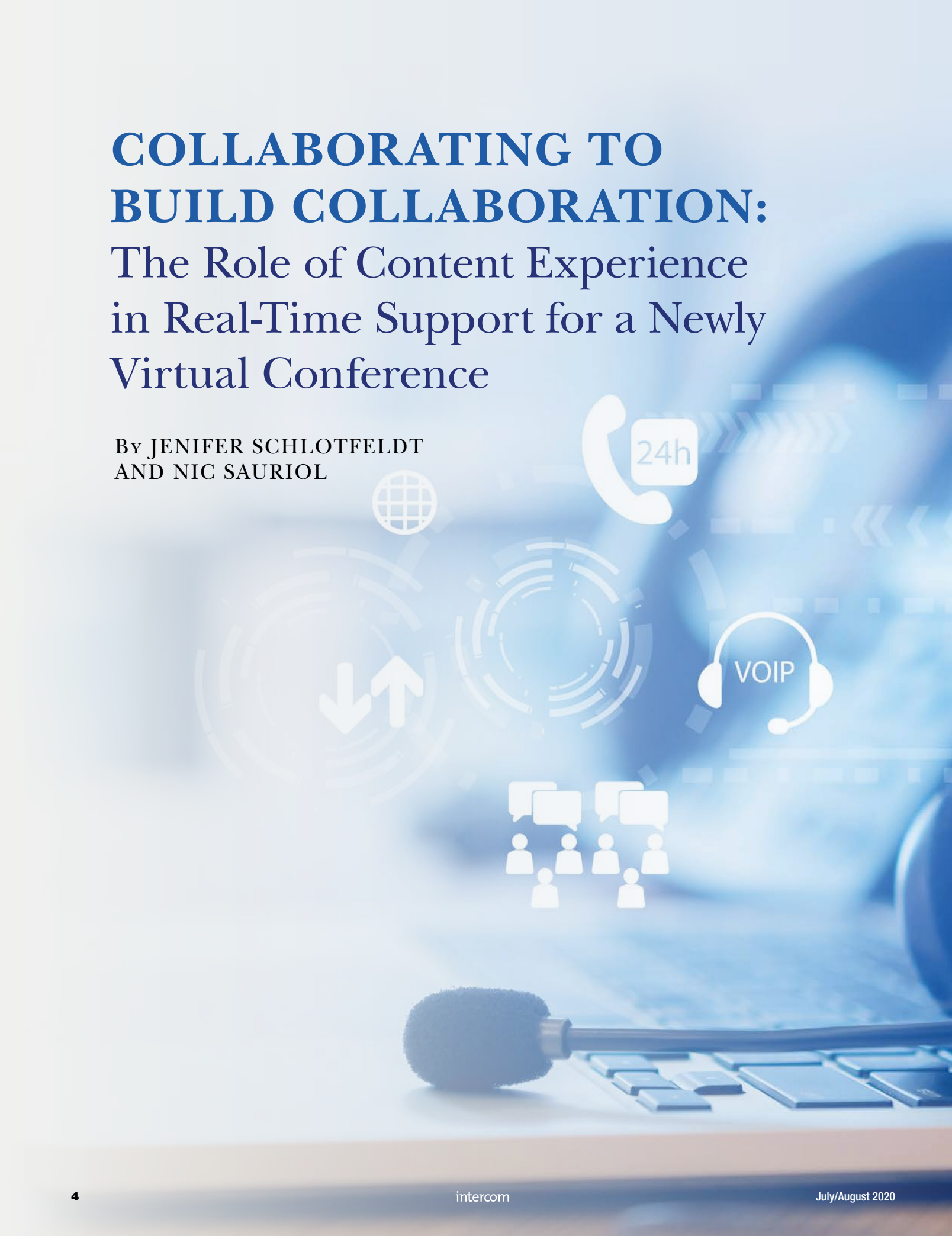
COLLABORATING TO BUILD COLLABORATION:

The Role of Content Experience in Real-Time Support for a Newly Virtual Conference

By JENIFER SCHLOTFELDT AND NIC SAURIOL



AS COVID-19 WREAKED havoc on the world, IBM had to make the difficult decision to cancel its annual customer conference. For the first time, however, the company decided to create a digital-only version. Forty-seven days prior to the conference and counting, a multidisciplinary team collaborated to provide a first-of-a-kind conference for IBM. Content would come to play a critical role in the massive success and further serve a critical role in real-time dynamic learning and sharing.

The conference development team focused on figuring out how to host the conference in IBM's cloud environment and bring all the tools and technologies together to pull off a virtual conference. But as the broader team shifted to understand what attendees would need during the conference to provide a signature experience, major gaps emerged. How would we support this audience with a new registration flow and a new, real-time attendance toolset? This wasn't a traditional situation where a "docs" team provided customer-facing manuals. Instead, we heard the following:

> *Can you help enable an army of volunteer support people from all disciplines across the company and turn them into all-star support agents who can handle 100,000 potential visitors with questions ranging from "Where is this session?" to "Why am I not getting any audio?"?*

That's when our special set of skills became in high demand. Our Content Experience team is a cross-functional, highly collaborative group of content, user-experience design, and development professionals who regularly collaborate on the IBM Cloud product. We were being asked to bring that successful collaboration to ensure a successful conference support experience that would be handled by volunteers with no experience and would require a high degree of real-time collaboration to be effective.

Content Experience Advocacy to the Rescue

To start, we crafted an email to recruit 100 volunteers to staff a live chat during two days of the conference. Not surprisingly, there was no support team waiting and available for this situation. So, we had to look to volunteers to make the conference support successful.

The conference team members knew they wanted to provide FAQs for each tool the attendees might interact with, and they were building a chatbot to provide the first line of defense for attendee questions. We knew that providing editing support for the chatbot would be important. This included testing by asking questions that we expected the attendees would have and ensuring that we received bite-sized, conversational responses.

We then quickly turned to live chat. If the attendees couldn't get the answer they needed from the chatbot, they could ask to speak to a live agent. Cue our 100 volunteers. Our Content Experience team was presented with a folder full of presentations, spreadsheets, and notes full of FAQs, and we had three weeks to pull together a way for our army of volunteers to collaborate during the conference.

The team had to research and model, as best we could, not only the questions but the frequency at which we thought those questions would be asked. For other, more problematic questions, we needed to understand

"...we had three weeks to pull together a way for our army of volunteers to collaborate during the conference"

the context and provide background information for the support agents. For questions related to individual user contexts (such as an individual's specific system), we had to provide as much information as possible for a support agent to debug issues. This modeling drove the overall structure of the approach to support our volunteer support agents. We considered how to train a brand-new agent to handle escalations, attendee frustration, unexpected questions, and more. To complicate matters, these new agents were busy IBMers, so we didn't have weeks to train them to handle this entirely new role—we had hours.

As the team began building the training materials, we put ourselves in the shoes of the volunteer support army that would be responsible for answering questions about tools they didn't know and a conference they didn't plan. The primary goal was to provide answers to attendees as quickly as possible, so they could get back to the conference. We needed to pull together all the content into one accessible place. We needed to build a support site that would serve as the handbook for all the support agents, and we identified the following key features for the site:

- Search
- Good content that could easily be copied
- Easy-to-update content

Most important would be the team's ability to react and change. We had no idea how close our initial guesses on questions would be, as we had never done this before.

Starting with Search

Because the army of volunteers wouldn't have deep technical or support knowledge on any of the tools, or any in-depth knowledge of the ins and outs of the conference, the key was enabling them to find the answers efficiently. This wouldn't happen by having an assortment of spreadsheets, presentations, and notes open on their desktop. In addition, these documents were organized by the tools supporting the conference, and not by how users would be interacting with or using them.

Increasing the stakes, most of these soon-to-be support agents had never even been on the receiving end of a client anxious to get an answer, and those clients were likely going to be eager to attend an important session that they might already be late for. It was critical that the answers be accessible when both the agent *and* the client might be frazzled.

Scripts

If we wanted the live agents to have speed of delivery, we needed to enable them with content that was ready to be delivered. For each error condition or area where we expected attendees to have questions, we provided clear background information for why the attendee might encounter this situation or what might be causing it.

Then we provided copy-to-clipboard versions of scripts that the virtual agents could reuse in their conversations in the live chat, as shown in the example in Figure 1. This was critical, as these were agents who had hours, not years, of training to prepare to handle client questions on the fly. We wanted to ensure that, as much as possible, we could help them by embedding experienced-agent phrasing and tone into their default answers.

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>
> *... Suggested chat script*
> Let's check that closed captioning is turned on. Do you see the CC button enabled?
>
> *... Suggested chat script*
> Sorry about that. Not all sessions support closed captioning.

Figure 1. An example of the information seen by agents that could be copied and pasted into live chats with clients.

When we recruited volunteers, we didn't have the luxury of handpicking for the unique skills we thought would ensure agent success. Given the number of agents we needed, and the fact that we were asking people to volunteer, we required only two skills:

- The ability to politely engage with attendees
- The ability to look up common problems from our support site

Easy to Update

The publishing environment needed to be accessed by hundreds of IBMers, and we needed to make continuous updates to the content. Although we leveraged the FAQs that each of the tool teams provided to initially populate our site, we knew we wouldn't catch all the scenarios that attendees might encounter during the conference. Thus, instantly refreshing the site as needed was key.

This seemingly small decision about the publishing environment was ultimately a critical one that enabled our content to become what was effectively a rich, real-time collaboration environment and the keystone of our support system. What we developed became a just-in-time answers engine that took any single question asked of an agent and turned it into a committed update available to all other agents within moments. The result was that we had countless on-the-fly updates, and when agents weren't actively answering a question, they were funneling all questions through to our content team in a continuous conversation.

For the volunteer army, we held a training session, making sure to offer it multiple times to hit the availability of each of our volunteers. This was going to be our first feedback opportunity! For most, it was their first time seeing the support site, so we weren't expecting to get feedback on the content. What we *did* get was volunteers asking questions about the live chat tool they were going to be using and anticipating the types of questions they might get. This was valuable in filling in a few more content gaps.

Then it was game time. We had the support site writers available to collaborate with the all-volunteer army in a private chat. As volunteers came on the clock and reported new issues that attendees were experiencing, we could quickly provide new scenarios in the support site with those tailored scripted answers. As each new wave of volunteers came on board, the answers were there—just waiting to be searched and provided to the attendee.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we learned about how "docs" could be evolved to pivot into a model of rich, just-in-time collaboration that enabled a large group of people to take on an entirely new skill domain confidently and successfully. There are many ways that documentation can serve a pivotal role in enabling richer client conversations with our engineers, support, and beyond. In this way, documentation can serve as a rich, authoritative medium that serves as the keystone of collaboration between our teams. It might not have been "docs" in the traditional sense, but those same team members, skills, knowledge, and content provided customer-facing content.

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Sharing Your Authoring Solution with Other Teams

By KEN SCHATZKE | *STC Senior Member*

YOU'VE SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENTED an authoring solution for your organization's technical communications team. You're single sourcing online help, manuals, specifications, release notes, and other technical content. You're translating that content into dozens of languages. You're saving your team time and your organization money. Your solution has even turned a few heads in management. Now they're wondering if you can roll out your solution to other teams in your organization.

Technical communicators create and maintain a lot of content for their organization's customers, but they're rarely the only ones doing so. Knowledge workers in other teams—from marketing to sales to implementation to support—are also producing content. This content can take many different forms and is often maintained in a variety of systems, from simple word-processor documents and spreadsheets to sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) systems and knowledge bases.

Organizations are increasingly realizing that having separate teams maintaining content for their customers in different systems is counterproductive. Ultimately, it's the same customers consuming this content, and they don't particularly care which team in your organization created a piece of content, as long as it meets their needs and helps them realize their goals.

This realization was one factor my employer, SMART Technologies, considered when it decided to adopt the Unified Commercial Engine (UCE). This business model organizes customer-facing teams, such as technical communications, around the customer journey and encourages breaking down silos that often emerge in organizations over time.

As I write this, we're in the early stages of adopting UCE, but our team has been encouraged to find ways to share our authoring solution, and the best practices we've developed around it, with other customer-facing teams. In this article, I'll review the five-step process we're using to do just this. Whether or not your organization is implementing a business model like UCE, you can use these same steps to collaborate with the customer-facing teams in your organization.

Step 1: Research Your Customers

Collaborating with other teams is a process internal to your organization, so it might seem strange to start by first learning about your organization's external customers. Remember that all the content your team and other teams create is ultimately for those customers. Having a fundamental understanding of who those customers are will allow you to communicate more effectively with other teams.

If your organization sells products to businesses (in other words, it's B2B), your typical customer likely consists of more than one type of user: the end user who uses the product in their day-to-day work, the IT or other technical specialist who installs the product, the purchasing manager who decides to buy the product, the third-party developers who create add-ons or accessories for the product, and more. If your organization hasn't already created personas for these different user types, you might want to take the initiative yourself. There are extensive resources on the web to help you create personas (I've included a few in this article's References section).

Once you have personas, identify which of them benefit from your team's content. If there are personas that your team doesn't support, do some research to identify if other teams are supporting them in some manner.

"Having a fundamental understanding of who those customers are will allow you to communicate more effectively with other teams."

Step 2: Research Your Team's Authoring Solution

You've likely spent years developing your authoring solution. Before you roll that solution out to other organizations, it's a good idea to review it. What are the solution's main strengths? What are its weaknesses? Which elements of the solution would be the easiest to roll out to other teams, and which elements would be more difficult for those teams to implement?

Capture your answers to all these questions in a format that you can share with other teams. For example, you could create an interactive form that the members of these teams could fill out to determine whether your solution would be a good fit.

Step 3: Reach Out to Other Teams

With personas and a thorough understanding of your team's authoring solution in place, you next need to identify other teams that can benefit from that solution and reach out to them. This can be more difficult than it sounds. Even a moderately sized company can consist of dozens of small teams, with members in locations around the world. While not all of your organization's teams might benefit from collaborating with you, you might be surprised by the ones that can. For example, you might find that a sales team for a particular region is creating its own training courses, because the training team based in your organization's headquarters isn't providing content localized for that region.

You'll likely need to reach out to your manager and HR department to map out your entire organization and identify potential partner teams. If your organization maintains an intranet site or uses a human resource information system (HRIS) like Workday, you can leverage these resources in creating your map.

Once you've mapped out your organization and identified potential partner teams, reach out to their managers or team leads. Arrange a meeting where you can introduce yourself and your team and inquire about the other team and its needs. In particular, you want to identify the following:

- The type of content the team creates
- How frequently the team updates this content
- The users (personas) of this content
- The tools and processes that the other team already has in place for creating content
- Any benefits the team is realizing from its tools and processes
- Any pain points the other team is encountering with its tools and processes
- Any other issues or considerations of which your team should be aware

It's important to clarify that you want to collaborate in a bottom-up way. You're not attempting to take over the other team or its work. You just want to find ways your two teams can come together, benefit from each other's experience, and ultimately serve your organization's customers better.

As your teams get to know each other, take the opportunity to introduce the other teams to your authoring solution. Use the research you completed in step two to identify the benefits of your solution and determine if it is an appropriate fit for the other team and its content. You'll then be ready to start working together.

Step 4: Start Small

You've established a relationship with the other teams in your organization that create content. Hopefully, all teams involved are excited about this opportunity to collaborate, streamline processes, and create better content, using your authoring solution as a foundation.

Your first instinct might be to take advantage of this positive energy and begin rolling out your entire authoring solution to the other teams. However, this might not be the best first step for various reasons:

- The other teams likely have well-established tools and processes. While those tools and processes aren't perfect, the teams are comfortable with them and can continue to use them to create content—at least in the short term.
- Authoring solutions are complex. It likely took months—if not years—to implement the authoring solution within your own team. It could take as long, or longer, to roll it out to other teams, and if you roll out the solution too quickly or without considering the other teams' specific needs, you'll damage the new relationships you've established.

Instead, start small with one focused pilot project. Is there a deliverable that another team is struggling with that your team's authoring solution could help them with? Is there a persona that isn't being served well by any team's content? Is there a major prospect in the pipeline that could be converted to a sale if offered a deliverable like an interactive quick reference? Ideally, the pilot project should be small in scope and span—at most, a few months.

Once you've established a pilot project, work with the other teams to create a plan. As in any project plan, it should outline who will do what and when they'll do it. Include time for the other teams to learn and use your authoring solution, and include a means for them to provide you with feedback on the solution.

More than likely, you'll find that your team's solution isn't a perfect fit for other teams. You'll need to make adjustments. Starting off with a small pilot project allows you to make those adjustments without delaying a larger implementation effort. If you can turn around content faster and with better quality as part of the pilot project, you have evidence for moving forward with a broader implementation of your authoring solution.

Step 5: Go Big

All the work you did in the first four steps of this process should be paying dividends:

- You have a better understanding of your organization's customers.
- You have established relationships with other teams that create content for those customers.
- You completed a pilot project during which another team tried out your authoring solution, and you adjusted the solution to meet their needs.

You're now ready to roll out your complete solution to the other teams. You'll likely need to come up with an extensive project plan and budget and seek approval from senior management. The good news is that you've done your homework, and your rollout should be more successful as a result.

Your technical communications team is a group of technical content experts. You likely have decades of combined experience that you've baked into your authoring solution. It only makes sense to share that experience with other content producers in your organization. Following this five-step process can ensure you do so in a way that's collaborative and will ultimately benefit everyone—including your customers.

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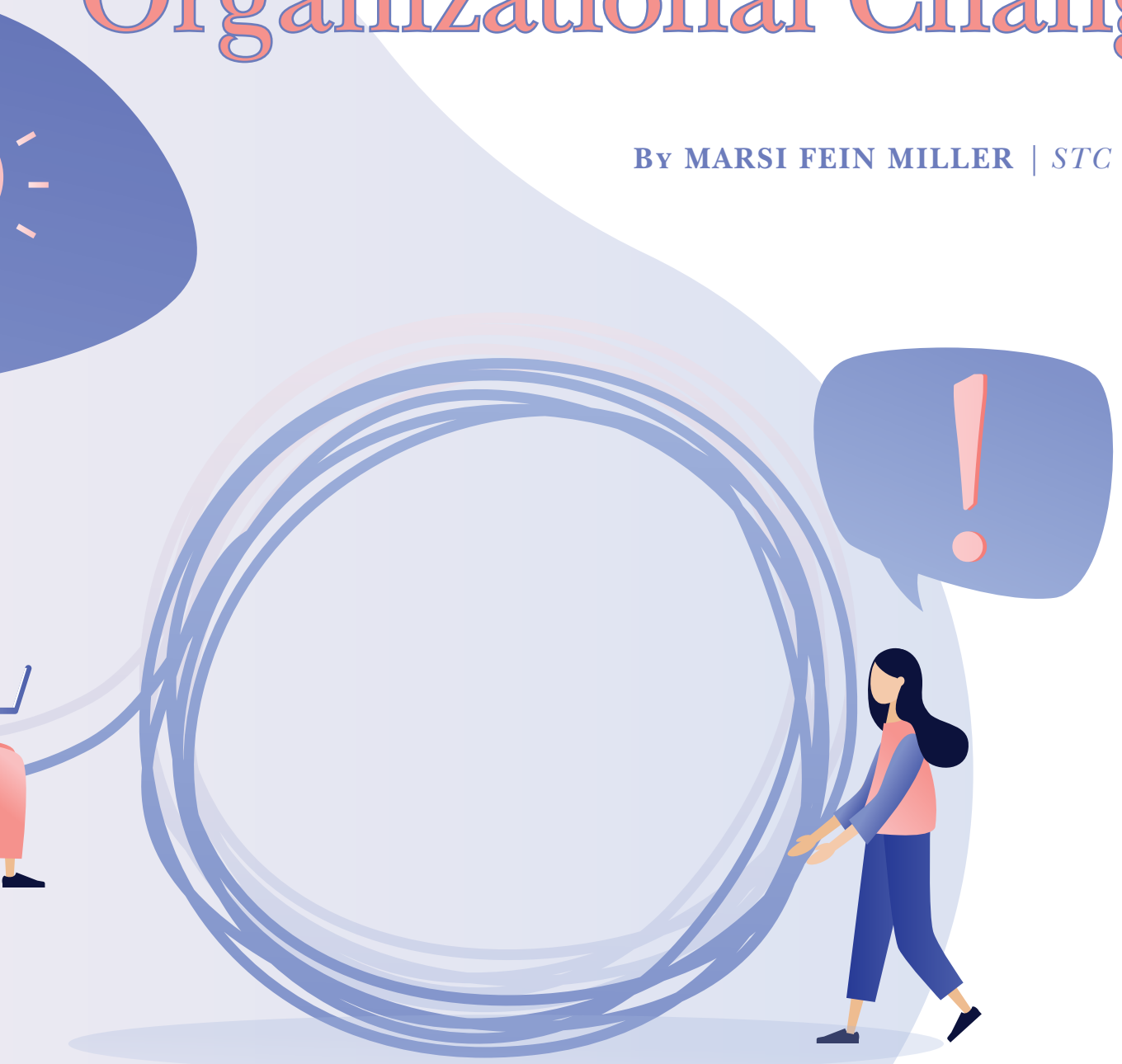
Six Questions

to Ask About Collaboration and Organizational Change

By MARSI FEIN MILLER | *STC Member*



IS THERE AN industry, occupation, or field that doesn't require collaboration of some kind? For technical communicators, collaboration is integral to what we do. It can mean working with subject matter experts to design content for users, bridging theory and practice with academics, or engaging with colleagues through STC and other forums.

"Collaboration" joins "empowerment" as one of those terms that is so ubiquitous it's practically meaningless. We are sometimes explicitly invited (read: instructed) to collaborate: "José, can you collaborate with Ha-yoon on this UI text?" The invitation might not mention collaboration—"I need the team to get this done in the next few hours"—but we are still expected to play well in the team sandbox.

Someone might ask you to collaborate on an organizational change, or it might be an implicit part of your ongoing work. Some organizational changes come with campaigns, slogans, or other marketing material. This is the world of strategic plans, reorganizations, and so on. Some organizational changes do not come with the label of "organizational change." Being alert to subtle or tectonic shifts in society and at work is key to determining whether you need to shift as well or to continue as you were.

Since collaboration and organizational change can mean so many different things, a generic set of questions can help you grapple with these changes as they come your way.

What does it mean to aim for XYZ?

If you're participating in the change

Ask two questions: "What does it mean to aim for [the intended change]?" and "What would happen if we did nothing about this?" Ask whether the reasons for the change have been fleshed out sufficiently (though not necessarily completely) before experimenting with or implementing solutions.

If you're leading the change

Initiate discussion about what the change means: What, if anything, are you aiming for? If coercion is necessary (and sometimes it is), pair it with questions—for example, "What does it mean to have a culture of safety?"—versus imperatives such as, "We must have a culture of safety." The difference is subtle, but a carefully conceived inquiry will allow you to uncover employee narratives and experiences around the change you seek.

If you have a background in quality, you might be familiar with the Five Whys. Also consider the Nine Whys. In general, engage people in the change before jumping to solutions. How you do this, however, is critical. If you want meaningful engagement, don't rely on town halls. Instead, go local (small, workplace interventions and groups).

What remains unsaid?

If you're participating in the change

Are you ducking certain conversations or refraining from voicing doubts or certainties? Do you know something that could improve the situation or help achieve the goal that you're not acting on?

If you're leading the change

Make it easy for staff to ask, and answer, "wicked questions."

What have we agreed to Amplify, Diminish, Ignore, or Monitor (ADIM)?

If you're participating in the change

What are you paying attention to, relative to the change? Are you doing anything to amplify it or to diminish certain behaviors or activities?

If you're leading the change

What is the consensus regarding meaningful measures of change (versus trivial or vanity metrics), if any? Are there aspects of change that are qualitative, worthy in and of themselves, that don't lend themselves to measurement?

What do you need to make meaningful progress on the change?

If you're participating in the change

Discuss what you need to make meaningful progress on the change in a way that's effective, efficient, and ethical. *How* the work gets done is just as important as *what* gets done; "results only" workplaces can invite shortcuts and privilege the immediate over long-term institution building.

If you're leading the change

Ask, "What do I need to do to make meaningful progress on this change? What do I need from others? What should I stop doing or tweak? What should I keep doing or amplify?"

Try not to end every discussion about the change with, "Any questions, comments, or concerns?" It feels rote. If you want to be brave, occasionally (and in your own words), say something like, "It's hard for me to know if I need to make a small change that could possibly make a big difference. I need your help on that." And then invite discussion.

Who should be involved in this change?

If you're participating in the change

Ask yourself if you want to be involved in it, or to what extent you want or need to commit to it, as well as what choice you have in the matter.

If you're leading the change

Ask if there is a group of people in your organization who are not represented in the change effort and who should be. "Who is not here who could help us with this change?" Or ask, "Who is involved in this change who perhaps shouldn't be?"

Change requires the appropriate skills, perspectives, commitment, expertise, knowledge, and data. The legitimacy of the change effort is more intangible, but you can enhance it by sharing power appropriately and ensuring everyone who should have a seat at the table is actually there.

Does this change have a destination?

If you're participating in the change

Ask if there is an end goal (for example, "By December, we need to have DevOps in place"), or whether it is nonlinear and perhaps more complex. Does our desire to be collaborative lead to excessive cooperation so that we can't discuss disagreements and problems?

If you're leading the change

Avoid misclassifying the nature of the change. Even end-point changes have some measure of ambiguity. If the change is complex, don't simplify it with something like a strengths/gap analysis. With complex change, your job is to manage the uncertainty and the unknowns by defining a path of travel ("This is the road we're traveling on"), not a destination point. Think of it as a series of small experiments. If that's too binary for you (experiment succeeds or fails), think of it as a probe: You are probing the organization to see which approaches resonate.

Conclusion

Think critically about these six ideas and your context for collaboration and change. And consider your use of self. The quality of your relationships at work—your connections to others and theirs to you—affects your ability to collaborate effectively.

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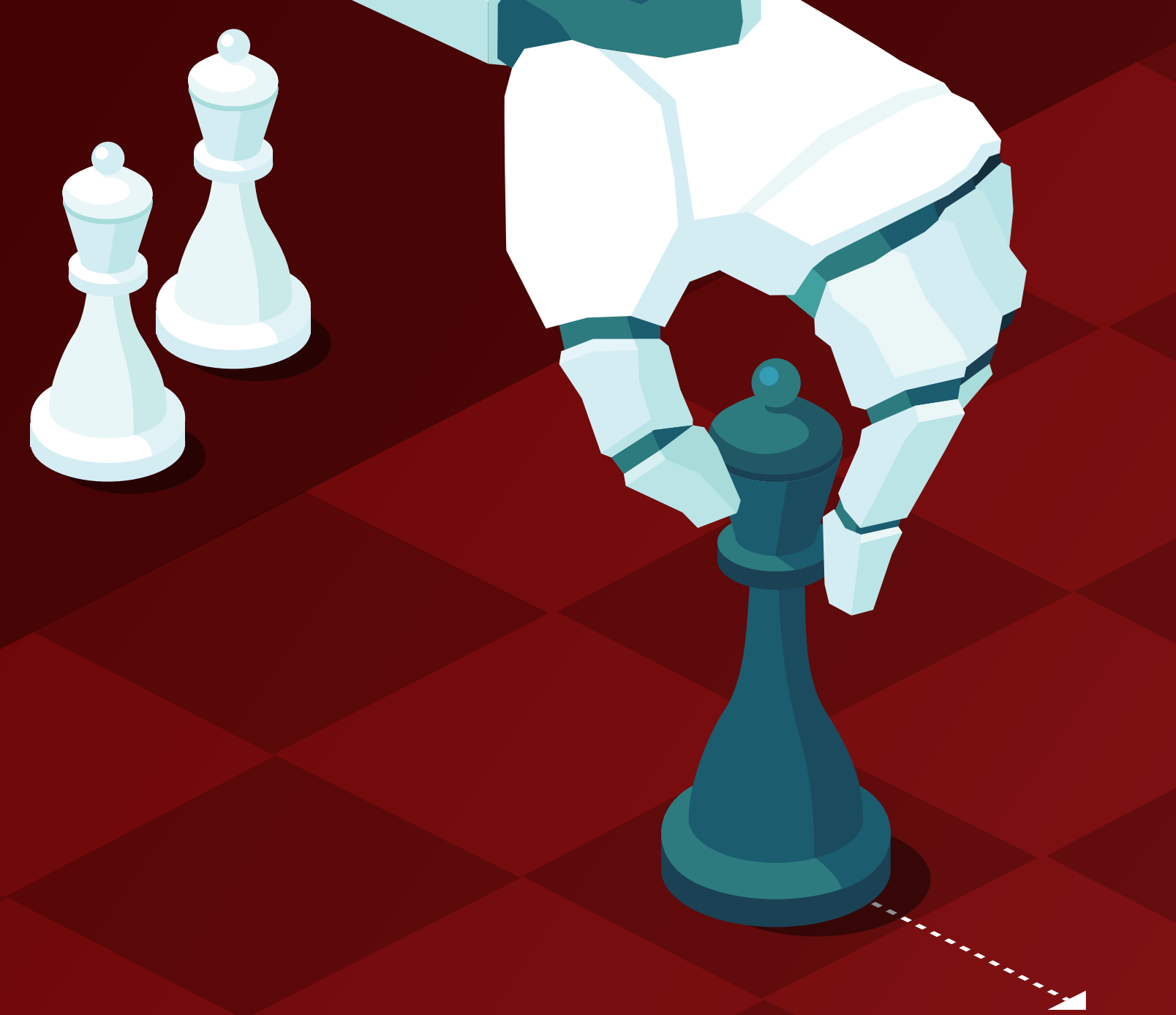


COLLABORATIVE JOB HUNTING:

Beating the Sinister ATS

By JACK MOLISANI | *STC Fellow*

AN APPLICANT TRACKING system (ATS) is a software application that enables organizations to receive, store, and manage résumés and job applications. As a recruiter, I've been using an ATS for almost 25 years. At first, the typical ATS was little more than a database in which you could receive a résumé, associate it with a job, and then mark the résumé as "qualified" or "not qualified" for the job.

Another use was to receive résumés "to keep on file" for future jobs. When a new job came in, the first place I looked was my ATS to see if I already had a résumé that matched the job requirements.

The first ATSs were PC-based but soon moved to web-based systems. I was in Hawaii on 9/11 when the U.S. closed all airports for five days, but I could still work, because I had my laptop and a web-based ATS.

For decades, ATSs were just a tool for (as the name says) tracking job applicants as they moved through the hiring workflow: resume receipt, phone screen, first interview, second interview, and so on.

But then everything changed.

The Rise of the Machines

With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, ATS companies gave their systems a sinister (in my opinion) ability to rank applicants based on how closely an applicant's résumé matched the job description—and automatically reject applications that didn't score high enough.

I can understand why organizations use an AI-based ATS. They receive far more applications from people who aren't qualified for a given job than from people who are. Recently, I received more than 20 applications for a position that required five years' experience with .NET programming and a Secret security clearance, but *none* of the applicants had a security clearance, and most weren't even .NET programmers!

This problem of receiving unqualified résumés has grown significantly over the past decade. I attribute this to applicants not bothering to read job descriptions. Many just view the job titles on an app and then *swipe!* to apply.

Yet another contributing factor is that many job sites—like Monster.com or Indeed.com—enable people to upload a résumé or profile and set their profile so that the sites automatically send the résumé when employers post a job they might match.

So now you have AI-based systems automatically sending résumés to AI-based systems that automatically reject the résumés.

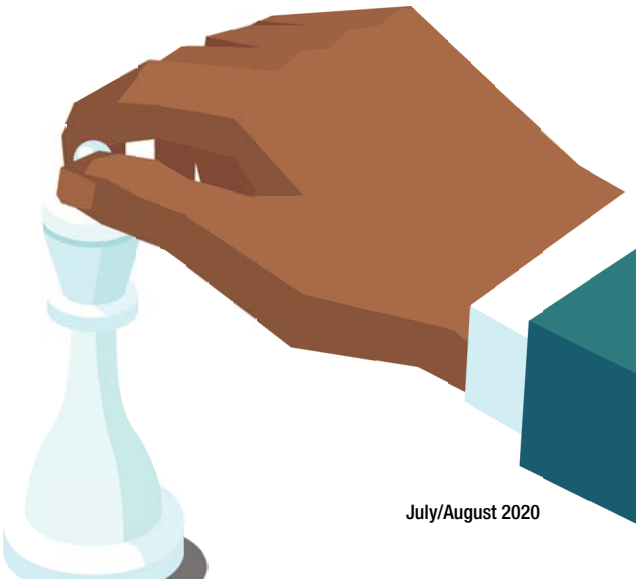
Talk about the rise of the bots!

On the Plus Side

If there is a possible silver lining to applying for a job through an ATS, it would be that the system is unlikely to display racism and other forms of discrimination. A study conducted in 2003 looked at whether candidates with names like Emily and Greg were more likely to get interviews than people with names like Lakisha and Jamal. The study showed that résumés with white-sounding names received 50% more callbacks than those with Black-sounding names. Using an AI-powered ATS would (in theory) reduce such bias. I say "reduce" and not "eliminate" because there is going to be a human decision at some point, and discrimination based on race, age, sexual orientation, and religion still occurs. (One can hope it is significantly less in 2020 than 2003, but it still exists.)

So What's a Job Seeker to Do?

One thing you can do to increase your chances of getting an interview is to optimize your résumé to match the job you're applying for, similar in practice to search engine optimization (SEO). A good place to start is the book *Get the Job: Optimize Your Resume for the Online Job Search* by Pamela Paterson.



Next, there are websites where you can upload the job description and your résumé, and the site will show how well you match, similar to the hiring organization's ATS. I haven't used these sites myself, so I don't have one to recommend, but an internet search for "check if your résumé is ATS friendly" will produce a list.

Note: One reason I dislike AI-based ATSs is their *lack* of intelligence. A friend of mine was using a site to check how well she matched a job posting, but was consistently getting a low score no matter how she tweaked her résumé. But then she noticed that the title of the job posting was "UX/UI Developer," but the title in her résumé was "UI/UX Developer." That simple transposition was enough for her to be rejected by the ATS.

What's a Better Thing to Do?

In the old days, a typical job posting would say: "Technical Writer needed. If interested, send your résumé to Jobs@BlackHoleNeverToBeHeardFromAgain.com." You would send your résumé with the hope that, someday, someone might look at your résumé and call you back. It's the same problem applying for a job through an ATS. Actually, it's *worse,* because the ATS is programmed to weed you out.

So, what's a job seeker to do? *Stop applying for jobs through ATSs!*

Enter what I call "collaborative job hunting." Submit your résumé for a job via a living, breathing human being!

Your chances of getting an interview are exponentially greater if you submit your résumé through a personal connection versus through an ATS. There are many ways to do this:

- The most obvious and fruitful way is sending your résumé to someone you know at the company—even better if they are in the same department!
- Use your business networks, such as other STC members or people in your LinkedIn network who work at the target company. Ask people in your network if they will forward your résumé to the hiring manager.
- Use LinkedIn to find someone in the company or department, even if you don't know them personally. While you may be reluctant to reach out to someone you don't know, keep in mind that many organizations give employees a bonus for referring a candidate who is hired. It's far cheaper and easier to give a bonus to an employee than to post the job and weed through hundreds of unqualified candidates. You get a personal referral, and the person gets a monetary reward for referring you: win-win.
- For bonus points, find hiring managers on LinkedIn and contact them. They are looking for candidates and should welcome your communication.
- Here's a secret: Most organizations do not list HR or recruiter contacts on their website, but almost all HR managers and recruiters have profiles on LinkedIn. Why? Because they use LinkedIn to search for candidates! So, rather than applying through an ATS, reach out to recruiters on LinkedIn and ask if you can send them your résumé. They might say yes, they might ignore you, or they might say, "Apply online and I'll keep an eye out for the application." Ah! You're applying via the ATS, but you have a live person looking for the application, and maybe even moving you out of the "rejected" folder if the ATS weeded you out. Score!

Planning for the Future

Let me close with a piece of advice for increasing your chances of getting a job in the future if you aren't currently looking: *Be visible.* Here are just a few of the many ways you can do this:

- Volunteer in your STC chapter.
- Speak at conferences.
- Write articles for your chapter's newsletter—or, even better, for *Intercom.*
- Start a podcast.
- Go to meetups in your area.
- Start a meetup in your area.

The easiest way to get a new job is for a company to call you before they even post the job.

I wrote earlier that the first place I look for people when I get a new job posting is in my ATS. That's not exactly true. The first place I look is the people I have met personally via online webinars, speaking at chapter meetings, going to conferences, and so on.

You can do the same.

Remember: Skip the ATS, send your résumé to a live person, and land that new job!

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Content Collaboration: The Foundation for a Stronger Experience

By ALYSSA FOX

COLLABORATION. IT'S A word we hear all the time. It's the new way of managing. It's the new way of working. It's the new way of communicating. But how do we actually put it into practice? And how important is it—really—to content teams and efforts?

Your organization wants to attract prospects interested in solving their problems with your solutions, educate those prospects, and ultimately drive long-term engagement and trust with them. Creating and publishing useful and usable content is one of the most impactful ways of providing the value your buyers and customers are looking for, and when technical and marketing teams join forces to deliver that content, collaboration multiplies the effectiveness of that effort.

Technical communication, at its core, is information that helps users accomplish tasks in a product or service. The goal of that technical information is to minimize frustration and help readers use the product in the most efficient way to achieve their goals in the larger context of their daily job. While documentation is most often targeted to be used after purchase, it's also a key evaluation point in the buyer's journey as prospects research potential solutions to address their pain points.

Content marketing is a marketing approach that focuses on creating informative and valuable content to help buyers understand and solve their issues, as opposed to straight selling of a product or service. Today's buyers spend a large part of the sales cycle researching on their own. According to Demand Gen's 2020 Content Preferences Study, 67% of respondents said they rely on content even more than they did last year to research and inform purchase decisions.

Because both of these types of content require an examination of a target audience and its needs, an understanding of the use cases behind those needs, a clear way to address those needs, and a desire to build trust through valuable information, it's easy to see why collaboration between technical and marketing content is so crucial. Both teams will benefit from working together to understand their part in achieving their organization's business goals and building a strong foundation of collaboration.

Benefits of Content Collaboration

When technical and marketing content teams align to make their working relationship collaborative, there are both internal and external benefits. On the technical side, gaining insight into outcome-focused language can be a game-changer for documentation. It's easy for technical communicators to get bogged down in only the tasks and actions for which they're providing instructions. Working closely with marketing, however, sheds light on how users' needs are met with the product or service they're documenting. Weaving that information into the documentation in the appropriate places makes that communication more effective by showing an understanding of, and empathy for, users' pain points and how they're addressed. Adding information that shows you understand and care about a user's challenge also focuses the communication on the user, not on the product, which can inspire brand loyalty.

Another benefit that technical content teams receive from tighter collaboration with marketing is more visibility within marketing of the value technical content brings to the business and its bottom line. High-quality documentation published on the web provides immense value to an organization in the following ways:

- Providing technical requirements early in a buyer's research
- Improving product trial experiences and making them easier
- Optimizing content for search engines
- Helping retain customers

Marketing teams will hopefully recognize the value that the documentation brings to their own efforts in attracting potential buyers with informative content and will work closely with the technical content team in that

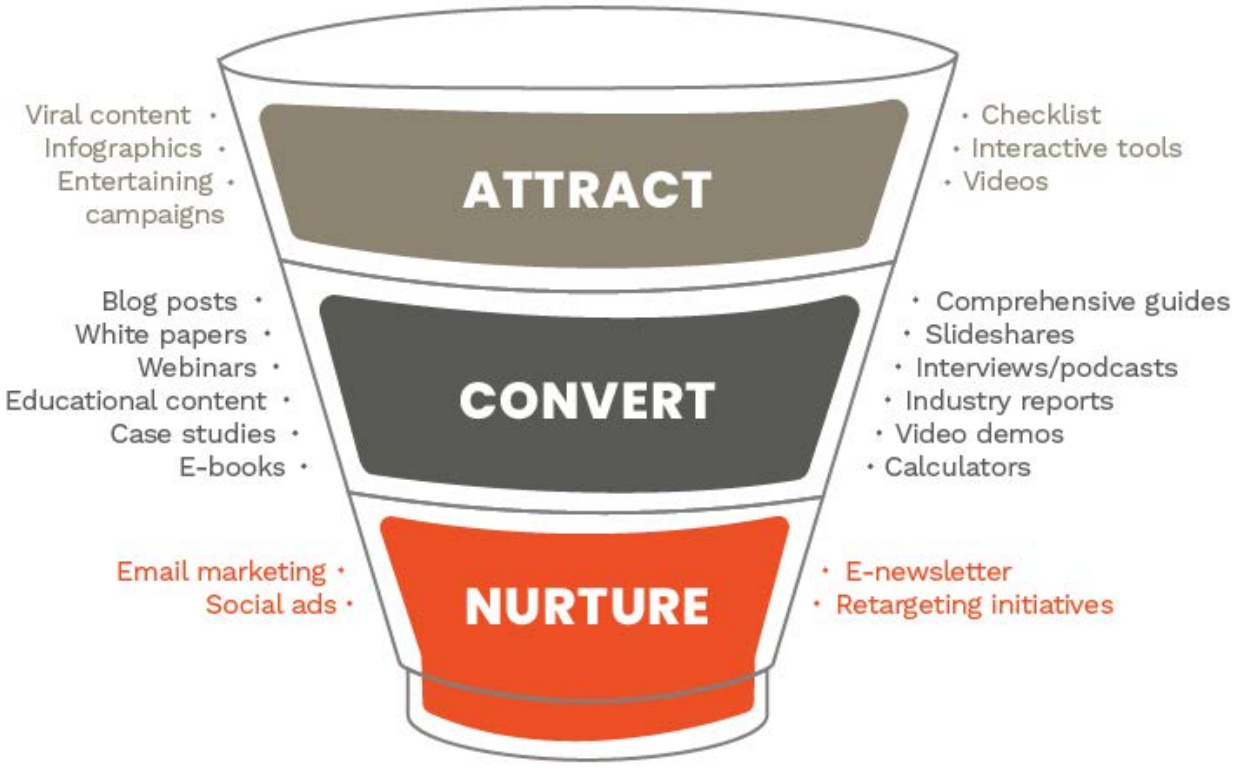

Figure 1. Multiple types of sales funnel content originate from technical content. Source: Fractl blog

regard. Technical content can be a springboard from which to launch multiple types of content, including blog posts, technical white papers, videos, and more. Technical content also enables marketers to guide buyers through a content path from a high-level story to product positioning to technical information that supports that overall consistent story. As Figure 1 shows, multiple types of content used in the sales funnel can originate from technical content.

Marketing teams can also use metrics from the online documentation to determine what users are reading about most or skipping over, as well as the paths they travel from one piece of content to the next. Armed with this information, teams can target content marketing specifically to what users are looking for most often and adjust positioning based on how users actually use the products, rather than trying to guess.

Finally, since technical communicators are content creation and publishing professionals, they typically have a more defined and structured approach to content delivery that marketing teams can learn from. A consistent workflow and measurement methodology contribute to higher quality content and feed a stronger understanding of product usage and content performance back into marketing content plans.

A Shared Content Vision and Goals

Although it seems basic, it's worth reiterating that to make this collaboration work, the technical content and marketing teams must have a shared vision for their content. That shared vision must be based on *business outcomes*—they're what will resonate with the content consumer, whether that consumer is

- a prospect trying to learn more about their particular challenge,
- a buyer who's at the point in the research process of selecting options to solve that challenge, or
- a user who's already bought the solution and is trying to make it work for them.

After your teams have worked together to define that shared vision, they should work together to define joint goals, such as the following:

- Creating or improving a unified customer experience
- Aligning technical and marketing content
- Driving awareness and leads through SEO

Unified Customer Experience

With both the technical content and marketing teams writing content with this vision in mind, their content will help the organization build a relationship with the audience, improving the customer experience and enhancing brand perception. Ensure that the technical content and marketing content look and feel similar, with the same branding, messaging, and style applied. Your reader should never notice that different types of content come from different teams, or their experience will be disjointed and will distract from the information they're meant be consuming. Collaborate around the

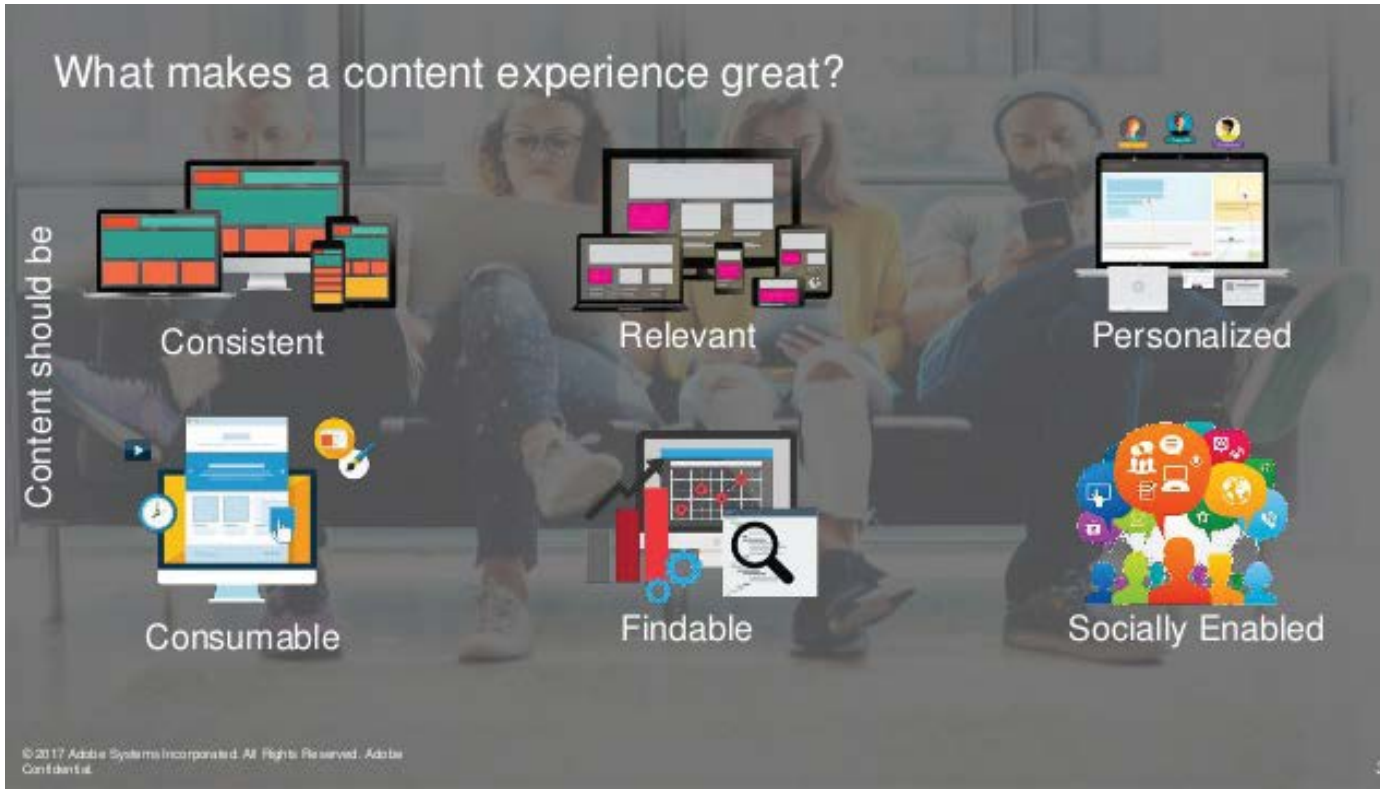

Figure 2. Characteristics of a unified content experience. Source: Dustin Vaughn, "Spanning Silos" LavaCon presentation

content characteristics that will provide your customers with a unified content experience; some are suggested in Figure 2.

Technical and Marketing Content Alignment

As previously mentioned, the types of questions you're answering with your technical content can provide a wealth of potential topics for marketing content—thought leadership, tutorials, videos, and infographics, to name a few. The idea is not to copy topics verbatim from documentation, but to take a technical concept and repurpose it into a higher-level thought leadership content asset. For example, a topic about configuring master account dashboards in a user guide might convert to a thought leadership piece on "Strategies for Effectively Managing Multiple Accounts." The higher-level piece can serve as an introduction to the topic, and the ability to drill down into the more technical topic gives you an opportunity to build a relationship with a technical audience from the very beginning, even before they buy.

SEO Value to Drive Awareness and Leads

Technical communication plays an important role in helping users better understand a product and accomplish certain tasks. When looking for answers to their questions, users or prospective buyers often search online. Include keywords in your documentation for which you want your organization to appear in search engine results, and ensure your documentation is properly indexed to appear in results along with the rest of your website. The exposure to your products and company is also beneficial because technical content needs to be authoritative and technically accurate. Because company authority is a key ranking factor on search engines, including your technical documentation for SEO purposes can make a big impact on marketing efforts to drive awareness of your company.

Additionally, consider linking from the documentation to some of your marketing content and vice versa. The richer the relationship among your various types of content online, the more relevant search engines find those topics when searching based on keywords. Tracking users' paths between these linked types of content also gives you additional information on what readers are interested in hearing more about and where they go next to get that information.

Making Content Collaboration Work

Once the content teams jointly define their content vision and goals, it's time to put the people, processes, and technology in place to accomplish those, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Putting people, processes, and technology to work to accomplish collaborative content goals. Source: Transparency Market Research

People

Everyone needs to feel that their voice is being heard—whether they're on the technical content team or marketing team. True collaboration will happen only if this is the case. To that end, it's a good idea to have a trusted leader who can oversee the discussions necessary to ensure everyone is heading down the right path.

Additionally, putting the right people in the right roles is essential. The technical content team should serve as a bridge between the product team and the marketing team. The marketing team should actively seek input from the technical content team. The relationship between these teams must be proactive and respectful to ensure the collaboration needed to accomplish jointly defined goals. Look at different personalities and strengths across both teams to ensure that each team member is able to own an aspect of the content process and is willing to work with others in the larger effort.

Processes

Unified consensus in overall content strategy and creation methods will facilitate the most effective collaboration. That doesn't mean everyone has to agree on every detail, but frequent communication led by a trusted leader helps ensure that everyone's voice is heard. Hold regular meetings and make impromptu conversations a habit to keep everyone headed down the same path.

Defining and documenting a consistent content workflow across the technical content and marketing teams reduces internal squabbles over how to plan, create, review, and publish content, saving time and money. Creating a collaborative content calendar gives visibility into each team's content plans, offering an opportunity for content atomization and reuse. A content calendar also opens the floor for discussion about the best publishing channels for each content asset, along with an exchange of ideas for how to promote and publicly highlight the content. Does a linear approach work, with separate teams for content creation, design work, and publishing? Should you use an agile approach? There are numerous other processes to consider when creating and publishing content; take time to discuss these with your teams and decide which processes to prioritize to maximize collaboration and efficiency in your organization.

Technology

Technology is a huge assistant in reducing duplicate work, eliminating confusion, and maximizing collaboration. What types of tools should you consider to enable technical content and marketing teams to work more efficiently together?

Depending on your organization's size, budget, and content production maturity, you might consider content management systems, collaborative editing tools for simultaneous review, content analytics tools, or content marketing platforms. Don't forget the more basic tools that make a difference as well, such as collaborative communications tools that enable real-time conversations across multiple time zones and teams, including video where needed.

Conclusion

Building relationships with buyers and users is at the core of brand loyalty, and informative, helpful, and relevant content is one of the most important components of building trust in that relationship. Unifying technical communication and marketing teams to provide a cohesive and consistent story about the pain points their buyers are facing and how to solve those problems is a worthy investment for your company to make. An enthusiastic collaboration between those teams raises the quality of your content, improves the buyer journey, and ultimately positively impacts your bottom line—and that's the success we're all looking for.

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FIVE WAYS TO Improve Your VIRTUAL COLLABORATION

By KATHERINE (KIT) BROWN-HOEKSTRA | *STC Fellow*

IT'S HARD TO believe it's been 13 years since Brenda Huettner, Char James-Tanny, and I wrote *Managing Virtual Teams: Getting the Most from Wikis, Blogs, and Other Collaborative Tools*. While the tools have changed and improved significantly in the intervening years, much of the advice about managing the human side of the equation is still relevant—perhaps even more so in light of recent pandemic challenges.

Many people are just discovering what those of us who've been doing this for a while already know: *No amount of technology will solve the people and process issues you face*. When teams first start working virtually, it exposes the weaknesses in team dynamics, processes, and systems.

In light of that revelation, here are five ways to succeed in a virtual, collaborative environment.

Build a Shared Vision and Goals

The best teams, whether virtual or not, have a shared vision and goals. Everyone on the team knows why they're there and what their role is, as well as why they're doing a particular project and how it fits with the organization's overall strategy. When teams have a shared vision and goals that they believe in, they become engaged, creative problem solvers.

To create that shared vision and goals, teams also need to feel ownership. Starting with the kickoff meeting, discuss the following, and incorporate your team's feedback:

- Tie the project vision to the overall organization strategy.
- Identify the project goals, schedules, budgets, and constraints. Ensure that you understand the team's needs as well, and build those needs into the project (for example, vacation time, tools, training, time zones).
- Be transparent about budgets, challenges, and risks.
- Identify any holes in skills, personnel, tools, and so on, and then follow through with fixing issues.
- Build rapport by encouraging personal interaction and casual connections outside team meetings. (When you work virtually, Slack and other messaging tools can replace the water cooler chats, but be sure to set boundaries so that team members don't overuse them and annoy people.)

Be Explicit in Your Expectations

The best leaders provide clear direction and expectations. For multicultural virtual teams, clarity of expectation is particularly important. Discuss these expectations regularly, and be flexible enough to adjust them if something isn't working.

Everyone comes to a project with a particular set of expectations, assumptions, skills, and frames of reference. When establishing the team's charter, it's important to take these things into consideration and to have open discussions about them.

With clear expectations, team members know what they need to do and how their work affects everyone else on the team. No one needs to be micromanaged, because they know what they need to do and can hold each other accountable.

- Create a written charter that outlines the vision, goals, and expectations that the team has discussed and agreed to. (It should be no more than two pages.)
- Survey the team to ensure that you understand their assumptions about time, deadlines, hierarchy, and so on, then come to agreement about what these mean in the context of your team.
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities, dependencies, and consequences to the project if prerequisites are not met.
- Check in regularly and give immediate, constructive feedback. Don't wait until the annual review to tell people what they need to work on or what they're doing well.
- Focus on strengths.
- Build trust by modeling the behavior and attitude you want from the team.
- Remove roadblocks.

Be Proactive

Communication is the number one challenge with any project, even more so with a virtual team. No news is *never* good news in a team context, and things tend to escalate quickly on virtual teams. You can avoid these issues by building in communication and follow-through.

- Do what you say you will, when you say you will.
- Until you're shown otherwise, assume that people want to do a good job and are competent.
- Set up regular checkpoints with the team.
- Empower independent decision making (your team should have enough information to be able to make day-to-day decisions without needing to involve you).
- Make sure you are following meetings with a summary of decisions and action items that are clearly assigned and time-boxed. (This is particularly important for multicultural teams because of potential language and time zone challenges.)
- Encourage people to ask for help and to communicate both issues and accomplishments.
- Celebrate milestones, accomplishments, and personal wins. Give encouragement when it's needed.
- Admit mistakes, and offer solutions if you are able.
- Build your skills.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate using appropriate channels.

Ensure Equal Access

Even in 2020, internet and technology access vary globally (for example, some mountain communities might not have good cell service or access to high-speed internet, even in the U.S.). Depending on people's personal situations, they might not have space at home for a private office.

To the extent possible, companies need to help ensure equal access to technology and corporate resources:

- Ensure team laptops, mobile phones, and other equipment are up to date.
- Check internet bandwidth, and pay for an upgrade if needed.
- Keep project files in a centralized repository that everyone can access.
- Ensure that team members have a tech support/IT person available during their work hours.
- Set up and use email schedulers so that global team members aren't getting bombarded with meetings scheduled during their off hours.
- Share the pain of global meetings by rotating the time so that one team member isn't always getting up in the middle of the night.
- Establish backup protocols and check in/check out protocols so that people can download files if they need to work in an area that has poor connectivity.
- Ensure that team members have a global calling and data plan if they are working with international colleagues.
- Ensure that everyone is using the same version of software applications.
- Be flexible and understanding if connectivity is an issue at certain times.
- Provide training on working virtually.

Measure Results, Not Time on the Clock

Office-based cultures often make the mistake of punishing or rewarding people for time on the clock rather than for effectiveness and results. This measure does not translate well to working virtually for several reasons:

- When you work virtually, you can optimize your tasks more easily to work with your personal rhythms.
- Most people (once they get set up properly) can focus and get more done in a shorter time, because they can control their interactions more easily.
- People are more engaged and motivated when leadership is focused on results rather than clock watching.

Ideas for alternative performance measures include:

- Customer satisfaction
- Teamwork and quality of team interactions
- Deadlines met
- Awards for content quality
- Number of revisions required (as long as you're also tracking other factors that can affect this)
- Problems resolved satisfactorily
- Ideas generated and tested
- Technical accuracy and completeness

Conclusion

Communication, clarity, compassion, access, and accountability are key to successful team management. Working virtually requires that team members become more autonomous and communicate clearly. The benefits include higher team engagement and greater efficiency, as well as reduced office space requirements and costs.

KATHERINE (KIT) BROWN-HOEKSTRA (kit.brown@comgenesis.com) *is an STC Fellow and an experienced consultant with over 25 years of experience in technical communication, much of it working with localization teams. As principal of Comgenesis, LLC, Kit provides consulting and training to her clients on a variety of topics, including controlled language, localization, content strategy, and content management. She speaks at conferences worldwide and publishes regularly in industry magazines.*

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STC Names New Editor-in-Chief of *Technical Communication*

STC'S BOARD OF Directors is pleased to announce that Dr. Miriam F. Williams will take on the position of Editor-in-Chief for the journal, *Technical Communication*, beginning in January 2021. Dr. Williams, a Professor, Associate Chair for the Department of English, and former Director of the MA in Technical Communication at Texas State University, brings extensive professional and academic experience to the journal's helm.

In her professional career, Dr. Williams worked for the Texas Department of Health and Human Services Commission (DHS) where, as a Policy Specialist, she worked as a Regulation Editor/Developer. Later, at DHS, Dr. Williams became the Program Administrator for Regulation Editors. After completing her PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric at Texas Tech University, Dr. Williams began her academic journey at Texas State University in San Marcos, TX, starting in 2005. She was the Presidential Fellow for 2011/2012 and achieved the rank of Full Professor in 2014. Dr. Williams is an award-winning scholar; she recently received the 2020 CCCC Technical and Scientific Communication Award in the category of Best Article Reporting Historical Research or Textual Studies in Technical and Scientific Communication. Along with her co-editor, Dr. Williams has also edited two collections on race, diversity, and ethnicity. In 2017, she was elevated to Fellow of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW).

Dr. Williams views practitioner-academic collaborations in research as a central part of her vision for the journal, and as a scholar and practitioner with a commitment to social justice, she intends to build on Sam Dragga's efforts to keep the journal relevant, timely, and award winning.

We look forward to working with Dr. Williams in her new role as Editor-in-Chief.

Call for Associate Fellow Nominations

Senior Members: Allow STC to recognize your contributions to the Society!

BY PAM ESTES BREWER, PHD | *Chair, Associate Fellows Committee*

IT IS THAT time of year when STC encourages our senior members who have been active in the Society to pursue the honor of Associate Fellow. You can nominate yourself with the endorsement of another Senior Member, or you can be nominated by another Senior Member. Once your nomination has been accepted, you can apply.

Due to a generous donation from an anonymous member, the fees for all Associate Fellow and Fellow applications have been waived! During this economic climate, it was a priority of our donor that the fee associated with applying for these two honorary ranks in STC would not be a deterrent for potential applicants. We encourage all members who meet the requirements and are interested in these ranks to apply! More information about the ranks of Associate Fellow and Fellow with STC and the application submission process can be found here: **https://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/honors/.**

Learn more at **https://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/honors/.** Applications are due by 2 November, so send your nominations now!

Intercom Gears Up for a New Digital Experience

READERS OF THE online, digital edition of *Intercom* are in for a more engaging digital reader experience: *Intercom* will be launching a new digital edition with the September 2020 issue. While articles will still be available online at **www.stc.org/intercom/** and the print edition will still be mailed to members who have elected to receive *Intercom* in print, the digital edition will provide an optimized digital reading experience for both desktop computers and mobile devices. Stay tuned for this new platform, and tell us what you think! Contact Sarah Black, STC publications manager, at **sarah.black@stc.org.**

Membership 2021: What's New?

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS FOR 2021 are now open. What can you expect from STC membership in the year ahead?

Membership Form

As you renew, you will see a new page to update your demographic information. You may have encountered this page when you first signed up with STC, but it's now available with your renewal, as well. We encourage you to take a moment to review and make any updates to your information to help us get to know our membership a little better.

And for the first time, retired members can now renew their membership online! To qualify as a retired member, you must be a current member of STC with 10 years of membership, be 65 years of age or older, and work, on average, 20 hours per week or less. If you have questions about qualification, please reach out to us at **membership@stc.org**.

Communities

For the 2021 membership season, STC has reorganized its Special Interest Groups (SIGs) into two categories: Communities of Practice (COPs) and Communities of Interest (COIs). Members have always enjoyed being a part of our SIGs and being able to network and share knowledge across the globe with other tech comm professionals with common experiences and interests in specific topics. We have aligned our SIGs into two operational models to better reflect the offerings that the SIGs provide to their members. SIGs that are Communities of Interest (COIs) will provide a channel for open communication and discussion, as well as other social media platforms. Our Communities of Practice (COPs) will provide a more in-depth experience for its membership that will include the same benefits as COIs, a robust website presence, and educational and additional networking opportunities. Dues will remain $10 for SIG COIs, and dues for COPs will be $15, which allows STC to better support COP programming for its members. A full listing of our SIGs can be found on STC's communities page at **www.stc.org/communities/.**

Member Perks

We've added a few new Member Perks to our offerings for 2021 with companies that include ADP, Ace Hardware, Batteries & Bulbs, HP, Constant Contact, Sprint, as well as a benefit for rental assistance (coming soon!). As always, you can find the latest list of Member Perks by visiting **www.stc.org/members/perks/** and logging into your STC account.

NEW for Corporations

The Corporate Value Program (CVP) membership enables organizations to purchase a package of individual memberships for your entire tech comm team, at an overall discounted rate. We are now pleased to offer TWO levels of CVP membership: Professional & Academic and Gold. The new Gold

level includes all Professional & Academic membership benefits plus free registration for all live webinars; an additional 20% discount off member rate for online courses; free memberships to one networking chapter and any virtual networking Special Interest Groups (SIGs) about a specific area of interest; a free subscription to STC's Roundtable, and more! Visit **www.stc.org/membership/corporate-value-program/** for more information about this exciting new category.

Contact STC membership at +1 (571) 366-1914 or **membership@stc.org** with questions about renewal.

Upcoming Webinars

TechComm Fundamentals Bootcamp

1 October through 19 November 2020 (Thursdays)

11:00 AM – 12:30 PM Eastern Time (GMT -4; GMT-5 after 1 November)

Instructor: Leah Guren

Technical communication is an exciting and challenging career that offers unlimited opportunity for professional development. But to succeed, it's not enough to learn a desktop publishing or Help authoring tool—you need to master the analysis process. This is a thinking person's dream career!

TechComm Fundamentals Bootcamp is the fastest, most efficient way to jump-start your career in technical communication. It covers key theory that you can immediately apply to your work. It also gives you the skills you need to continue to learn and grow. Each element of theory is presented with hands-on exercises, real-world examples, and plenty of discussion. The course is sure to leave you feeling enthusiastic and well prepared to get started in the field.

Register at **www.stc.org/course/tc-bootcamp-oct-2020/**

Crafting Memorable and Influential Presentations

5 October to 2 November 2020 (Mondays)

2:30 to 3:45 PM Eastern Time (GMT-4; GMT-5 after 1 November)

Instructor: Danielle Hennis

How often have you had to sit through presentations that left you making a to-do list in your head? If you do not pay attention to the presentation, you will not retain the information. What would have made those presentations—what would make your presentations—memorable, influential, and successful?

We will review how the brain processes visuals, stories, data, and information, and then we'll apply that knowledge to a step-by-step process for you to use in order to make a more memorable and engaging presentation.

We will cover how to apply the principles discussed in PowerPoint, Keynote, or Google Slides, and we will review how virtual presentations should be designed differently than in-person presentations. With your new skills, you will leave with the tools needed to ensure your next virtual or in-person presentation engages your audience, persuades them, and is memorable.

Register at **www.stc.org/course/crafting-presentations/**

Design Thinking: Creating Prototypes and Sales Pitches

9 October to 20 November 2020 (Fridays)

10:00 to 11:00 AM Eastern Time (GMT-4; GMT-5 after 1 Nov)

Instructor: Adam Bradley

The session learning activities include learning about the fundamentals of design thinking and creating problem statements to resolve issues. We will also discuss ways of conducting ethnographic research and analyzing found data to brainstorm new concepts, narrow down the focus of ideas, and to develop a persona of the target market. Find inspiration through mood boards, exploring concept themes, product exemplifying word charts, journey maps, and data flow diagrams. We will also cover graphic design concepts, basics of drawing, and creating renderings. We will create low-fidelity mockups, wireframes, sketches, and storyboards to test concepts and make rapid improvements. Lastly, we will learn to make high-fidelity prototypes and sale pitches/presentations.

Register at **www.stc.org/course/creating-design-solutions/**

Ethical Perspectives on Captain Crozier's Letter

BY RUSSELL WILLERTON | *STC Member*

THE COVID-19 VIRUS has affected people around the world. Nations, states, cities, businesses, and organizations of all sizes have had to adjust their activities in response to this dangerous and sometimes lethal pathogen. Decisions about how best to respond to this invisible threat are often vexing. Many factors are involved in decisions that impact the health of large groups of people.

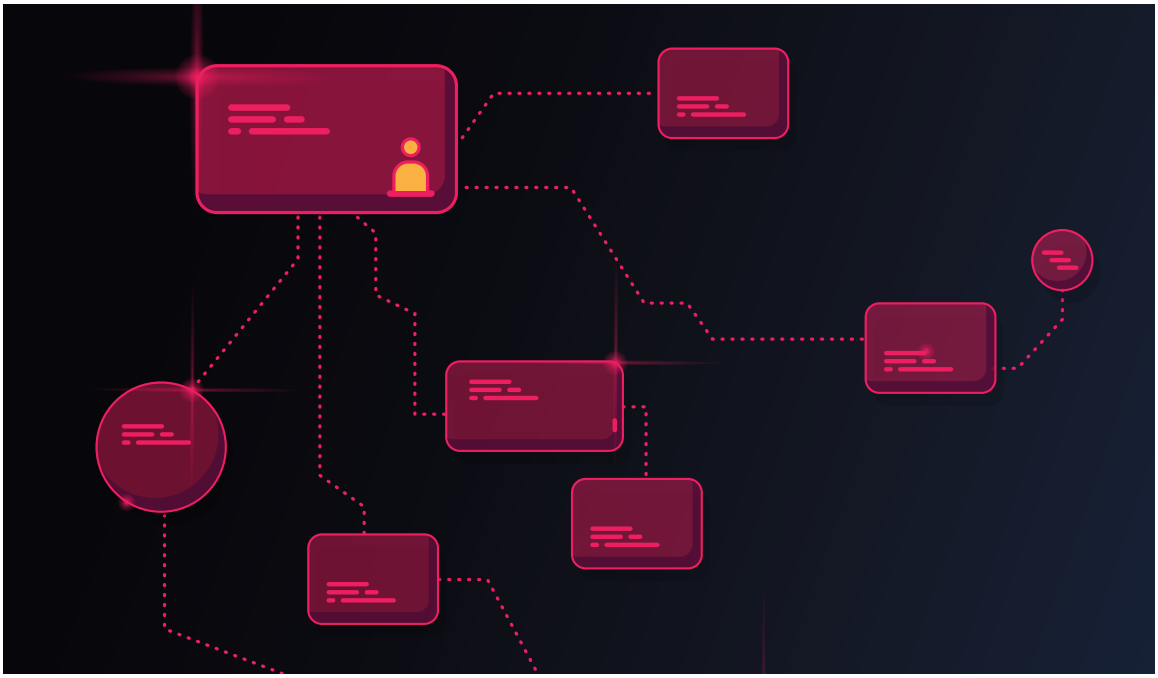
One example involves a U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS Theodore Roosevelt, and Captain Brett E. Crozier. In late March 2020, Crozier was the captain of the Theodore Roosevelt, a carrier with a crew of more than 4,000. At the time, a small number of sailors had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Crozier knew that the tight quarters on the ship would allow the virus to spread. In a letter dated 30 March 2020, Crozier expressed his great concern. He noted that he could not adequately quarantine sailors with the virus on the ship, and that sailors could not follow virus-protection guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and the Navy (in a document known as NAVADMIN 083/20). The final sentence of the letter stated what he desired: "Request all available resources to find NAVADMIN and CDC compliant quarantine rooms for my entire crew as soon as possible."

The letter does not state to whom it was written. Crozier emailed it to more than 20 recipients out of concern that his immediate supervisor would not let the letter reach a larger audience, according to David Choi. A copy of the letter was obtained by—some would say *leaked to*—the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which published it online.

Crozier was removed from command of the Theodore Roosevelt by Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly. Many sailors cheered and chanted in support of Crozier as he walked off the ship in Guam. Modly later apologized to Crozier and resigned his post. As this column was written, Navy leaders recommended reinstating Crozier to his post on the ship, but Secretary of Defense Mark Esper had not done so.

Conflicting Principles

In a discussion of workplace ethics, Mike Markel writes that employees have specific obligations to their employers. These include



This column features ethics scenarios and issues that may affect technical communicators in the many aspects of their jobs. If you have a possible solution to a scenario, your own case, or feedback in general, please contact column editor Russell Willerton at *russell.willerton@gmail.com.*

competence and diligence, generosity, honesty and candor, confidentiality, and loyalty. He adds that loyalty should not be absolute; employees should try to stop their employers from behaving unethically, even to the point of becoming whistle-blowers who expose such activities.

Crucial to the operation of any military organization is the concept of following the chain of command. When individuals do not follow the chain of command, they risk disrupting the organization's operations, disrespecting the organization's values, and being penalized for insubordinate behavior. (A full discussion of chains of command and military protocols is beyond the scope of this column.) By contacting others and not following the chain of command, Crozier is subject to criticism of his loyalty to his employer. Within a chain of command, Markel's ethical principle of confidentiality is relevant as well. Crozier's commanding officer, Rear Admiral Stuart Baker, could well have considered Crozier's act to have breached confidentiality. According to Choi, Baker did not support sending the letter to Navy leaders.

Following the chain of command is a means of demonstrating loyalty; failure to follow the chain of command can be seen as disloyalty toward superior officers.

And yet, Crozier clearly demonstrates loyalty to his sailors, whom he was employed to lead. In his letter, he writes that he wants to "achieve a COVID-free" ship to protect the crew. Noting that the Navy is not at war, he focuses on two primary goals:

- Preventing unnecessary deaths, reducing the number of sailors with COVID-19, and preventing spread of the virus
- Regaining readiness and capacity for warfighting as soon as possible

Crozier shows his loyalty to those under his command by putting their health and safety first.

Crozier's letter displays honesty. He does not paint a too-rosy picture. Crozier uses candor, which Markel describes as reporting to one's employer problems that might threaten quality or safety.

Crozier's letter also reveals his competence and diligence. Crozier uses vocabulary and formatting that a military audience expects to see. He begins his letter with a "BLUF" summary, which Kabir Sehgal defines as putting the *bottom line* of an issue *up front* for the reader to recognize and understand. Crozier plainly states the problem his ship faces, which is that he cannot comply with the CDC guidelines and the NAVADMIN 083/20 guidance on travel during the COVID-19 epidemic with the full crew on board. The formatting and organization of the letter clearly separate content into sections that help readers follow and understand.

In addition, Crozier cites an epidemiological study about the COVID-19 infection on the Diamond Princess cruise ship, calling it "the only comparable situation encountered thus far." He uses the evidence from the article to argue for removing the crew from the ship (minus essential personnel) and sanitizing the ship.

Markel writes that blowing the whistle on one's employer is a drastic step, but it is one that may be necessary. Whistleblowers might face retaliation in big and small ways; they might lose jobs. Markel advises working with employers and leaving whistleblowing as the last resort.

Discussion

While some details of the situation have not been revealed, and some aspects of the situation are difficult for civilians to understand, Captain Crozier's letter provides a number of questions to consider:

- Is Captain Crozier a whistleblower?
- By emailing his letter to a number of people besides his supervisor, was he disloyal?
- By emailing his letter to a number of people besides his supervisor, was he rhetorically effective?
- What factors should limit one's loyalty to one's employer?
- What principles of ethical behavior or ethical decision-making do you see revealed in this situation?

Your responses are welcome. Please contact me at **russell.willerton@gmail.com**. Your responses might appear in a future column.

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Meet the Change Agents

Interview with Kristina Halvorson

BY SCOTT ABEL | *STC Associate Fellow*

IN THIS INSTALLMENT of "Meet the Change Agents," I interview content strategy maven Kristina Halvorson. We discuss the changing content strategy landscape, what those changes mean for the future of the discipline, and the role of professional product content producers, including technical communicators.

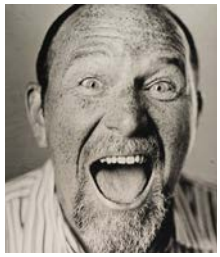
SA: It's hard to believe, but it's been over a decade since you published the first edition of your seminal book, *Content Strategy for the Web*. Some unofficial content industry historians have described the publication of that book as a tipping point in the recognition of content strategy as a business discipline. Back then, you called it an "introduction to the emerging practice of content strategy." How did the success of that book impact you?

KH: It was certainly life-changing. When it was published, I had two young kids, I was recently divorced, and I was running a business, so stuff was chaotic. Then the book came out, and suddenly I was "internet-famous." Mostly, I think the timing of the book was right. People in our field were just really tired of filling up their beautiful websites with terrible content, and this little red book gave them a good story to tell about why content *needs* strategy. I took full advantage of all the attention over the next few years, not only because it gave me the opportunity to yammer on about the importance of the practice, but also because I found myself in a position to lift up all the other, smarter, people doing the work.

SA: Although you are well-known in the field of content strategy, for those readers who may not be familiar with your work, can you tell us a little about yourself and the work you do?

KH: I own a content strategy consulting and events business called Brain Traffic. These days, my work is mostly about going on-site with teams to help set strategic priorities for their content initiatives. I also host *The Content Strategy Podcast*, which is really just an excuse for me to personally learn from extraordinarily smart people. Although I don't speak at conferences as often as I used to, I still show up at events to make noise about content strategy; it turns out that I will never, ever be done making the case for it. I'm also the mom of two smart, kindhearted kids, although can I just say that trying to raise kids in 2020 is crazypants? What is even happening in the world right now? Send help.

SA: I've had the privilege of attending your successful conference, Confab, held each year in Minneapolis. You've hosted several topic-specific versions of the event in the past (for higher education, for example), and I've heard that you've recently announced your plans to host a new



In the digital age, change happens quickly. This column features interviews with the movers and shakers—the folks behind new ideas, standards, methods, products, and amazing technologies that are changing the way we live and interact in our modern world. Got questions, suggestions, or feedback? Email them to *scottabel@mac.com*.

event focusing on the needs of product content strategists, content designers, and UX writers. Can you tell us about this event and what our readers can expect should they attend?

KH: Absolutely! This conference has been in the works for a couple of years, and we finally felt like the time was right to launch it. It's called Button [held online, 21–23 October]. The topics will be more narrowly focused than at Confab, which is really about the wider world of content strategy. If you lead or work on product teams, this event is going to dive deep into your world of unique content practices and principles. As for what to expect, I can say with 100% confidence that people can expect absolute excellence. We received nearly 200 talk submissions—which is unheard of for a first-time event—and the quality of the proposals is astounding. And we're really committed to ensuring event production is up to Confab standards!

SA: Content strategy is an evolving discipline aimed at addressing the rapidly changing needs of businesses and the content consumers they serve. What significant changes have you noticed in the content strategy arena over the past decade?

KH: This is the part of the interview when I want to ask you the same question, because there are far too many changes for one person to cover all of them! I mean, obviously, the biggest change has been mobile, but it's also difficult to remember when that wasn't even a thing (for example, when I wrote *Content Strategy for the Web*). Even just rereading that sentence makes me think, "well, duh." Also, the job title "content strategist" is now pretty much ubiquitous in larger organizations and in agencies—although what they *mean* by "content strategist" is another conversation. I think we have seen the content marketing hype machine start to falter—and I mention this in the context of content strategy in the hopes that marketing will start to loosen its stranglehold on "content" as somehow proprietary to their field. I am still waiting for content engineering to be widely recognized as a critical part of the discipline. And I wish I could say I've noticed most organizations maturing in their content practices—but, alas, this is not the case.

SA: What assumptions did you have at the beginning of your content strategy adventure that did not hold true over time? What caused you to adjust your views?

KH: When you're young, you think, "Well, this is so *obvious* that all I need to do is just *explain it* to people and then they'll *do it*." This, of course, is not correct. I really did believe that, after a time, the need for content strategy in every form—projects, teams, technology, the enterprise—would become a given in every organization. I definitely did not expect to still be making the case for it in 2020. That said, at this point, I am less interested in getting wholesale buy-in for "content strategy" and more interested in getting organizations to realize that stellar content across the customer experience isn't optional. It's a long game, and it requires full-on business transformation—unless, of course, you built content strategy into your business DNA right from the start, like so many product companies have. If leadership doesn't get that content is more than just a customer acquisition strategy, you'll need to settle for tactical, siloed content activities (and technologies) for the foreseeable future.

SA: For the purposes of this interview, I decided to leverage the power of the crowd to create a list of questions to ask you. The first question comes from Mike Petroff, senior product manager at Harvard Business Publishing, who asks, "What's your pithy one-liner describing the job of content strategist to a layperson?"

KH: Well, this is what I tell people who ask me on airplanes: "You know how, when you're online and you're trying to get something done, and whatever content you're coming across isn't what you need, or it's confusing, or it's just bad? We fix that."

The response I get is usually, "Give me your card immediately; you just described our website/app/CMS/everything." It's sort of like telling people you're a doctor, and then they start complaining about their symptoms. The other one-liner that sometimes works is, "I help get you the right content in the right place at the right time." But I find speaking to people's pain is usually more effective.

SA: Content strategist Debra Kahn wants to know if you can "provide any tips for overcoming resistance by content developers to the notion of content strategy."

KH: Well, once again, the key is to understand where they're hurting, and how content strategy can help. Are they overworked because they don't have any constraints or standards to help set priorities? Are they under pressure to demonstrate bottom-line results and need something to connect their day-to-day activities with business goals or user needs? Can you demonstrate how even some basic content strategy tools (an inventory, a short style guide, a simple content model) can streamline their work? Just telling people that content strategy is "the right thing to do" never works. You have to connect its benefits directly to some specific problem they have personally.

SA: While you're providing tips, Vanessa Vavra-Laughlin, global content solutions manager for American Airlines, wants your advice on how to encourage content leaders from various departments inside an organization to work together. She asks, "What are your top tips for content leaders aside

from the obvious 'learn to play well together'?"

KH: I always start with whatever strategic imperatives have been handed down from on high that year. Whatever departmental goals exist somehow ladder up—or should, anyhow—to those priorities. With solid situational analysis, you can usually find an opportunity for content strategy to help connect the dots across those departmental goals. Maybe it's improving end-to-end customer experience. Maybe it's finding ways to consolidate or reallocate resources. Maybe it's simply removing points of friction in cross-departmental collaboration. The other thing that's key is to make sure everyone feels *heard* when you're trying to get people to work together. If you just walk into the room and say, "Yes, hello, here are your new content rules," people are going to revolt. You have to bring everyone along for the ride. I'm a big proponent of team workshops in the content strategy process—early and often.

SA: Vanessa also asks for help understanding the problematic challenges associated with understanding content strategy terminology. She has noticed that information developers are using terms like intelligent content, structured content, and other jargon that many knowledge workers don't fully grasp. One of the terms she'd like your help understanding is "content design." In your view, what do we mean by content design, and who are content designers?

KH: Sarah Richards (Content Design London) popularized the term "content design" to describe a user-centered approach for doing content analysis, requirements, and creation. Her wonderful book *Content Design* explains that process. However, the larger content strategy community has really taken up "content design" to mean a field of practice which encompasses the roles and activities required to determine content requirements and guidelines that meet user needs. (I should clarify that content design as a "thing" should only be considered after the encompassing content strategy has been established—for example, purpose, audience, standards, messaging—and that UX writing is the manifestation of content design.) Don't @ me. [You can look up this expression on the Urban Dictionary website.—Ed.]

SA: Julie Travia, product content strategy lead, Northwestern Mutual, asks, "How can UX writers help designers understand the value of including writers in ideation sessions? In other words, how do I help our designers to better understand the value of cross-discipline collaboration versus 'you do the words' and 'we handle the design?'"

KH: Two things. First, when was the last time you had your designers sit in on any user testing that included real words in the interface? Watching users struggle with tasks and comprehension because of poor writing can be really eye-opening for designers, because—guess what?— those users are paying zero attention to the design. Second, if you can, give one of your feature teams the luxury of a fully allocated UX writer. After a few sprints, ask them to share their work with other teams, maybe in a lunch-and-learn setting. I'm confident the designers will be full-on converts and talk about how lucky they are to have their very own UX writer. I know this might be tough—in my experience, one UX writer is often spread out across several teams—but in the most competitive product companies (Shopify, Slack, Facebook, Netflix, Google, Airbnb . . . I could go on), content designers and UX writers are everywhere, and they're as valued as any other product team member.

SA: Content operations expert and STC Fellow Rahel Bailie often makes the case for understanding the difference between strategy and tactics. While strategy is the planning phase critical to successfully producing content—especially at scale—tactics are required to implement content strategy. Anna Schlegel, global product operations and strategy executive at NetApp, asks a tactical operations question about the best time to get rid of outdated content. Specifically, Schlegel asks, "After you map your personas and customer journeys, can you start decommissioning websites and architectures that are no longer needed?"

KH: My immediate reaction to this question is, "Ooooo, tell me more!" Unfortunately, without doing a situational analysis, I can't really provide a straightforward answer, simply because every organization's content ecosystem is unique. I can't say, "Decommission away!" without knowing how things are connected, or even why they exist in the first place. What I suggest is this: Before you make any changes to one-off websites or sections, make sure you have a sense of the whole. What are you working toward and why? What does your current content ecosystem look like? Then—assuming you have created your core content strategy, and you have a full understanding of user needs and expectations *specifically regarding content requirements*—you can start a rolling content audit to determine your "keep, kill, update, or combine" content. (I just made those four options up—you can obviously choose your own.)

SA: Customer support manager Geoffrey Sperl would like to know what you think the role of content—and the humans who have traditionally created it—is in a world powered by automation and artificial intelligence. When you peer into your crystal ball, what do you see on the horizon?

KH: I truly believe that one of my greatest strengths is this: When I don't know the answer to something, I say, "I don't know!" And I don't. I'm a strategist and a storyteller; I have never been great at predicting

the future. I also have a lot to learn about AI, and by "a lot," I mean "everything." So, Geoffrey, please ask me this again in a year, and I promise to have at least an idea . . . or two.

SA: You have a great post pinned to your Twitter account that reads: "PSA for everyone who doesn't work with content: Content is way more complicated than you think it is." What prompted you to write that?

KH: If you want to see a content professional's head pop off their shoulders, say, "What is the big deal—isn't content just words? Anyone can write." Unfortunately, this is still the general perspective amongst, well, almost everyone who isn't us. I feel like one of the best ways to get through to people how important it is that we invest our time and resources in getting content right is to scare them straight, and to make lists and lists of questions that should be answered before a single content request is ever made. We should demonstrate the connections between the people, processes, technology, and content products that exist everywhere. It's a mess! A glorious mess.

SA: If you could provide a single piece of advice for technical communication professionals hoping to advance their career in the uncharted waters before us, what would that advice be?

KH: I guess it would be the same advice I give anyone who wants to advance their career: Ask brave questions, learn to listen, read every day, be hungry, and be humble. The worst thing you can do right now is roll your eyes and say, "I've been talking about this for years; this is nothing new." Things are evolving at lightning speed, so don't pretend you know everything. It will hold you back.

SA: If you could ask a question of yourself (in this interview) that I haven't asked you already, what question would you have me ask of you—and what would your answer be?

KH: "Kristina, who do you think the coolest person in content strategy is?" Oh, it's *definitely* Scott Abel. Have you met that guy? He's *aces*.

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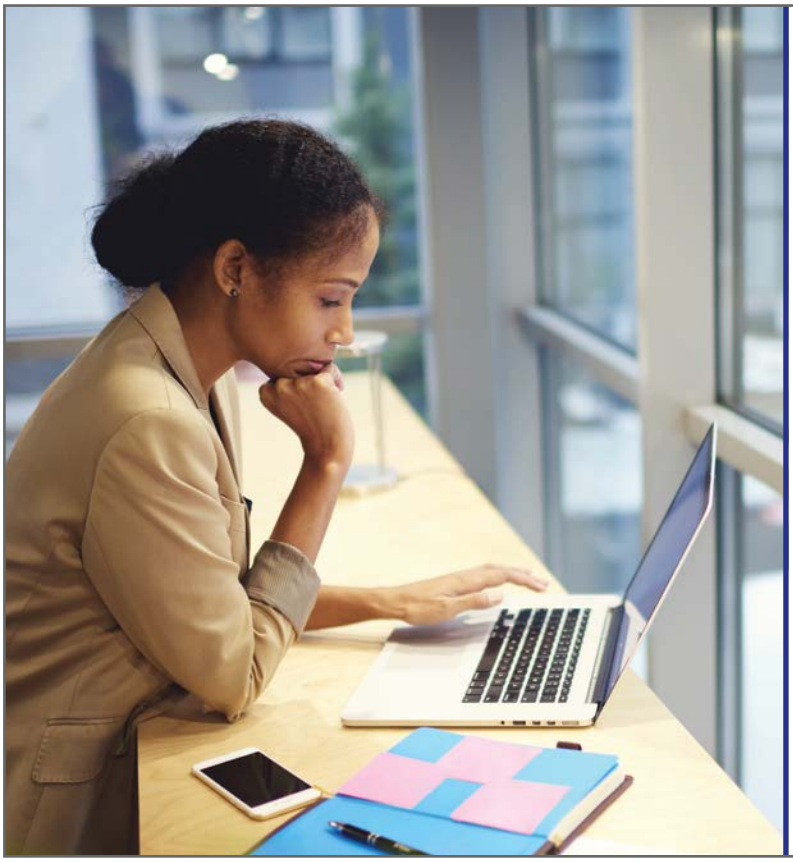

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Communication During Public Health Crises

BY KIRK ST.AMANT | *STC Fellow*

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has altered many aspects of society. From health care to education to shopping, all of us are changing our routines to address a public health crisis. This process has been difficult because it involves moving to new situations where we have little experience.

These shifts have caused confusion, panic, and challenges to the social order. Managing them requires effective communication to address the new contexts where we now interact. Technical communicators can help with these changes by creating content to guide behavior during public health challenges.

Contexts and Cognition

Most of us operate on "autopilot" when performing regular tasks in familiar spaces. This is because we use mental models called *scripts* to guide our behavior in these locations.

Repeatedly doing the same thing in the same place allows our brains to establish a mental model that directs our actions on a subconscious level. The first several times we perform a process, it requires most of our attention as we dedicate conscious brain activity to learning that new thing. The more we perform the process, the more ingrained it becomes, until we create a mental model for it. At that point, our brains can process that activity subconsciously, and we no longer need to "think about" doing it.

These processes are often connected to the setting where we perform an activity. The moment we recognize our location, our subconscious accesses a script that tells us what to do there based on previous experiences. We then slide into that routine without needing to think about it—something that frees our conscious mind to do other things in that location.

COVID-19 Context Challenges

Much of the COVID-19 discord involves scripts for behavior. Medical facilities, for example, are now often strained beyond capacity, meaning health-care providers cannot rely on scripts for providing care. Similarly, patients cannot use scripts for "visit emergency room" to access health-care systems. In these cases, individuals must focus all their attention on what to do in new situations. The resulting demand on the brain's processing ability can cause feelings of confusion, frustration, and panic.

These situations are not new; they have occurred during previous public health threats. Then, as now, the inability to rely on mental models led to fear and disruption. Addressing challenges then, now, and in the future involves understanding how mental models affect social interactions, identifying where such models break down, and providing content that explains what to do in these situations. As experts in developing informational content, technical communicators are well positioned to help mitigate many problems during public health crises.

Content, Cognition, and Care

COVID-19 has taught us that public health crises can disrupt activities across different areas. Similar disruptions have occurred during past public health threats, and such patterns can provide insights on the content needed to address current and future threats from pandemics.

Technical communicators can help address such situations by providing scripts via informational content that tells individuals how to perform activities during a crisis. Core content to develop includes the following:

- *Instructions for identifying infection*: Overcrowding in health-care contexts often reflects individuals flocking to medical facilities to determine if they have a condition. Instructions for assessing if one has a condition, and what to do if symptoms are present, can reduce strains on health-care systems.
- *Strategies for shopping smartly*: Panic related to procuring food can cause problems during pandemics. Addressing this situation involves content explaining how to create household meal plans, shop for those plans, and purchase groceries in ways that minimize trips to the store.
- *Protocols for probing postings*: Misinformation contributes to disruption during public health threats. Instructions explaining how to assess sources of information for accuracy and report fictitious content to remove it from circulation can help mitigate such problems.
- *Instructions on indirect interaction*: Social distancing is only successful if individuals have alternative ways to engage in interactions. Instructions for shifting certain activities—from workplace interactions to educational instruction to monitoring family when they are away—can facilitate such processes.

This column provides information on trends, practices, and resources for applying technical communication skills in health and medical settings. Columnist Kirk St.Amant is the Eunice C. Williamson Chair in Technical Communication and a member of the Center for Biomedical Engineering and Rehabilitation Science (CBERS) at Louisiana Tech University. He is also an Adjunct Professor of Technical Communication with the University of Limerick in Ireland and a Guest Professor of Usability Studies with Southeast University in China. He contributes two columns ("The Cognitive Communicator" and the new "Health and Medical Communication") to STC's *Intercom* magazine and serves on *Intercom's* Editorial Board. Contact him at *kirk.stamant@gmail.com* to submit or pitch a column idea.

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Job Search During a Pandemic, Fake Job Ads, and Transitioning Back to the Office

BY KIT BROWN-HOEKSTRA | *STC Fellow and* **CINDY CURRIE** | *STC Fellow*

I lost my job during the pandemic crisis, and I haven't had to job search in years. How do I find a job when it's difficult to meet in person?

The current health and economic crisis makes job hunting especially challenging. The good news is that there are a lot of communication jobs out there. You just need to be creative to find them and to stand out from the crowd.

In addition, most people are working from home right now, so think about how you can set up your space to optimize working virtually. FlexJobs and VirtualVocations list jobs that are all, or mostly, remote. If you aren't used to working remotely, the most important things are to be proactive in your communication and to do *what* you say you will *when* you say you will.

- **Schedule your time.** It's easy to lose track of time when you're stuck at home and have fewer social cues. Set a schedule for yourself to work on finding work. Do the job-hunting tasks first thing and work in focused time blocks. Job hunting is emotionally and mentally challenging, especially when there is so much angst in the larger world, so if you spend a few hours early in the day working on the job hunt, you can reward yourself with something fun or relaxing afterward. Take time to rest and reflect.
- **Use your network.** Update your LinkedIn profile, and reconnect with colleagues you haven't seen in a while. Do some virtual networking to find out what people are doing and schedule coffee chats with them. Many people are feeling starved for connection right now, so this is a good time to reach out.
- **Research companies and industries you want to work in.** As at any other time, research the companies you're interested in working for. Think about what you're actually interested in. The great thing about technical communication is that every product, process, and service uses it. Try to find out how the company has supported its employees during this time, because that will give you an idea of what the culture is like and whether you want to work with them. Glassdoor and PayScale can provide insight into how the company compares to others in its industry. If possible, identify someone you know who works there and talk to them about their job.
- **Think about what *you* want in a job and in a company.** Transition times like this are an opportunity to really think about what you want in a job and whether your past goals and wishes still serve you. If not, spend some time thinking about what you want in an ideal job, then focus your search on companies that have those qualities. Maybe you want to start your own consulting company, or maybe you want to shift to a different area of focus. Whatever it is, focus your activities around building connection and skills in those areas.

Ask a Tech Comm Manager is an advice column geared toward answering all those questions you have, but might be uncomfortable asking. We glean the questions from social media, forums, and most importantly, from you, dear reader. If we don't know an answer, we will interview experts and get information for you. Send us your questions to *kitbh.stc@gmail.com* or tweet them to *@kitcomgenesis* or the hashtag *#askTCmgr*.

- **Teach a webinar, start a blog, or guest lecture for a class.** Use your skills to share your knowledge. It's a great way to showcase your skills, and helping others has the benefit of helping you forget your own troubles for a bit.

I've been hearing about a lot of fake job ads out there. How do I tell if it's real or fake?

Unfortunately, in any crisis, there are scammers out there who want to take advantage of others' situation. If someone approaches you out of the blue with an interview for a job you have never applied for or a company you've never heard of, it might be a scam. Here are some things to investigate:

- **Check out the website.** Fake websites often will look very slick. Telltale signs that they're fake include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - A physical address that doesn't show up in Google Maps (or looks like it isn't in a commercial or industrial part of town)

- No people listed in the About section
- Generic, fluffy text that is largely information-free or sounds like it was copied and pasted from somewhere else
- An email address that doesn't match what's in the source-code view
- Spelling and typographical errors

- **Do an image search.** Save the logo image and then do a Google search. Fake companies sometimes use close approximations of other companies' logos or names.
- **Ask your friends and colleagues.** It's possible that a friend or colleague might have passed on your résumé and forgot to tell you, so ask around. Find out if anyone else has heard of the company.
- **Check with the local Chamber of Commerce.** Companies often join the local Chamber in the cities where they have headquarters or a significant presence. Sometimes, the Chamber is aware of these scams and can confirm your suspicions.
- **Trust your instincts.** If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Be careful about giving out your personal information. Legitimate companies should not be asking for driver's license, passport, tax, or other government ID numbers until they have given you a written offer.

I've been working from home since the pandemic started, and I've grown to like it. Now my company wants us to go back to the office. How do I transition back?

It's anyone's guess when things will return to normal (whatever that will look like). With some cities and states reopening, companies are beginning to transition back to the office (whether or not they should be is another conversation). If you have been lucky enough to work from home, it can be a big mental shift back to the office.

Hopefully, your employer has communicated well with employees about COVID-19 throughout this period. This level of communication needs to continue. Employers need to put in place new health and safety protocols, then communicate and train employees in aspects of the "new normal":

- Phased back-to-the-office plans (perhaps even staggered scheduling to reduce the number of employees in the office at any one time)
- Social distancing requirements and office reconfiguration, including improved guidelines for work areas, reception areas, common collaboration areas, training areas, and more
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines
- Food service areas, housekeeping, and cleaning
- Any operational changes (for example, using VoIP instead of telephones with handsets) that will be put in place to support the new health and safety protocols

The exact details of how this will play out in your company and office space depend largely on the guidelines in your state and on your employer's commitment to a safe and healthy environment.

You need to be fully informed and comfortable with your company's approach, so read every communication your company sends out about how they're handling things, attend all virtual town halls, and participate in all employee surveys to make sure that your voice is heard. If you are high-risk in any way (or frankly, just plain scared), or if you have child care issues due to school closures, talk to your manager about it and ask for what you need to be able to go back to the office.

Now is a good time to discuss future work-from-home arrangements with your company, too. Successful companies will operate on three key principles:

- Employee perception is key.
- Honesty and transparency are critical to building employee trust that the company is doing all it can.
- Good common sense is a must.

If you're not getting what you need from your company, let them know ASAP, and ask for better. If your company isn't receptive to your needs, work out why, and try to address it—or plan to move on if they won't meet your needs. And if working from home now suits you better than going to the office, check out FlexJobs and VirtualVocations for positions that are all or partly remote.

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Such materials apply to the COVID-19 situation, and to future public health threats, by providing scripts to guide interactions and avoid confusion over what to do—and how and when to do it—in different situations. The dynamics involved will vary from location to location and group to group. For this reason, technical communicators need to identify who will need these materials and develop content these audiences can easily understand and use.

Conclusion

Public health challenges are a part of human history. The better we understand them, the more effectively we can address potential disruptions. An application of scripts can help technical communicators create content that quells panic and provides guidance during uncertain times. The ideas presented here can assist with developing content to address the current COVID-19 context, as well as to plan for future public health challenges.

The Art of Getting Lost

BY SEEMA MISRA

AT 5 AM THE ROADS LAY EMPTY. All the shops had their shutters down. Retired men gathered on the steps, reading their newspapers and sipping hot filter coffee in tiny steel cups. As the sun went up, business resumed in Bangalore's oldest market, Chickpete.

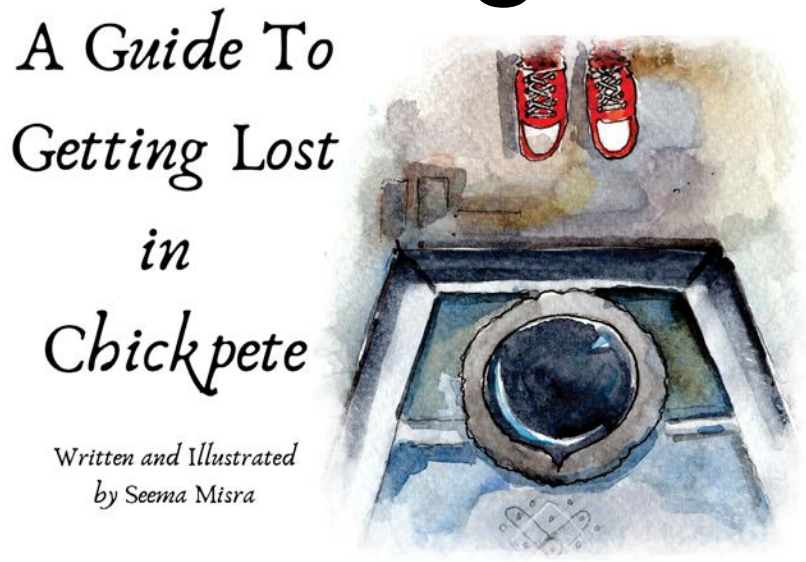
Located in South Bangalore, India, this market dates to the 16th century. The city's founder, Kempegowda, ploughed out multiple major trading roads here, leading to the development of markets catering to travelers.

I was ambling through these streets trying to "get lost." In the process, many discoveries were waiting to be made…

The fragrance from street food vendors. Aromatic incense sticks being burned in the temples. The "clack clack" sound of lathe machines. Gutted computer parts being sold in the "recycled" market. The glitter of steel utensils. The swish of silk and cotton fabrics being displayed to customers.

You can find a world of wonders here, if you are in luck. Wonders that are certainly not found in the supermarkets that dot the smart city. And stories come free with the experience. Delicate gold leaflets for a very special "Tanjore" painting are sold at an old, run-down herbal medicine store. The grumpy owner is a Tanjore painter himself, and he sells you the stuff only if he likes you!

Hole-in-the-wall shops sell lace, beads, gemstones, and objects that shine. Vintage cameras that don't (need to) work anymore. Peacock feathers and brass betel nut cutters. A shop full of mannequins—in various stages of undress. Another shop of just pickles—made in different homes from mangoes, jackfruits, olives,



onions, tomatoes, and green pepper vines. Like chapters in a fantasy novel, every lane is dedicated to a specific product: Sarees, jewelry, second-hand books, pirated books, oils…

I have always walked these streets with some plausible motive or another: Accompanying a friend shopping for her wedding trousseau, buying art supplies, or getting an iron wok when I first started living on my own, just because it sounded fancy.

During *this* visit to Chickpete, I was with a group of artists, and we wanted to disorient ourselves a bit. Maybe see things with fresh eyes., so we each used a geo-tracker app and walked around the area, drawing simple shapes through our steps. It was a new way of exploring a familiar place, aided by technology with enough room for human intervention.

I also spent some time sketching in these streets. As an avid outdoor sketcher and a core member of the city's Urban Sketchers group, I've become used to standing still and minutely observing various corners of the city, the kind they show in music video montages. Sketching familiar places in pen and watercolor allows me to experience layers of city life that I would have otherwise missed.

During the recent lockdown, I found some time to reflect on these sketches and weave them into a user manual—one that helps the reader to successfully get lost in Chickpete or any other familiar place.

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